

## TOWARDS A POST-PHENOMENOLOGY OF LIFE: CASTORIADIS' CRITICAL *NATURPHILOSOPHIE*

Suzi Adams

**Abstract:** The present paper situates Castoriadis' later philosophy of nature as part of wider debates on the problematic of 'life' within post-Merleau-Pontian currents. Through hermeneutical reconstruction, it argues that 'life', as understood by Castoriadis, points to auto-poietic modes of being. Castoriadis' interpretation of auto-poiesis is specific: self-moving and self-creating modes of being in the radical sense of ontological creation of form. The paper contends that Castoriadis' contribution to these debates is twofold. First, 'life' in the broad sense is extended to all regions of being, that is, to include physical nature. Second, the 'subjective instance' of life (as *erleben*) is instaurated with the living being. In Castoriadis' thought, however, this is centrally connected with the co-creation of 'the world' as a horizon of proto-meaning on the one hand, and the imagination on the other. Finally, in that Castoriadis' ontology of nature puts into question the modern scientific view of the world—and its underlying metaphysics—the paper concludes that Castoriadis' later *Naturphilosophie* is to be understood as part of the project of autonomy.

**Keywords:** Ontology; Phenomenology; Nature; Life; Castoriadis; Merleau-Ponty

In the wake of Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of nature and ontology, contemporary discussions in French phenomenology have sought to redraw the lines of continuity between human and non-human nature through a reconsideration of 'life.'<sup>1</sup> The present

---

1. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1968 [1964]) *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press; (1995) *Nature: notes de cours au Collège de France*, Compiled and with notes by Dominique Seglard; Translated by Robert Vallier, Evanston: Northwestern University Press. See also Renaud Barbaras 'Merleau-Ponty et la nature', *Chiasmi International: Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty*, 2, pp. 47-62, (Paris, Milan, Memphis, 2000). For our current purposes, the most prominent thinker in the post-Merleau-Pontian context is Renaud Barbaras. His phenomenology of life emerges from a sustained encounter with Merleau-Ponty, in the first instance, but he develops it further by way of critical engagement with Bergson, Husserl, Varela, Strauss, Jonas, and – most recently – Patočka. Within these discussions, Barbaras seeks to articulate the 'unity of life' before its bifurcation into a general sense of life as 'being alive' (*leben*), and the more phenomenological perspective of life as an 'experience of something' (*erleben*). His dialogue with Varela provides interesting points of comparison with Castoriadis' ongoing debate with Varela. See for example, Renaud Barbaras, *Vie et intentionnalité: Recherches phénoménologiques* (Paris: Vrin, 2003); *Le désir et la distance. Introduction à une phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Vrin, 2006); or most recently his Patočkan influenced *Le mouvement de l'existence* (Paris: Les Éditions de la transparence, 2007).

paper focuses on a little discussed thinker within current French phenomenological constellations: Cornelius Castoriadis. Emerging from multiple encounters with Merleau-Ponty's thought, Castoriadis' philosophy is best known for its interrogation of autonomy and creation in the socio-political domains.<sup>2</sup> His later reflection, however, reveals a renewed consideration of the creativity of nature which can be reconstructed in terms of the problematic of 'life'. Castoriadis' critical *Naturphilosophie* provides us with significant insights into the ontological pre-conditions of anthropic life on the one hand, or non-human regions of the cosmos as 'living' on the other. For Castoriadis, *life qua life* is understood as auto-poietic, that is, as self-moving, self-creating. The reconsideration of the self-creativity of being is part of his wider dialogue between romantic and Enlightenment currents of modernity where a critical *Naturphilosophie* is understood to question the lifelessness of the modern, mechanistic cosmos.<sup>3</sup> Although his later *Naturphilosophie* reconfigures the lines of continuity and discontinuity between human and non-human nature, Castoriadis does not reduce human institution to nature as part of a cosmic whole as some of the early Romantics were wont to do. Rather, with his image of being as heterogeneous and irregularly stratified, he continues to further clarify the characteristics unique to the human condition and question the flattening effects of the unfettered pursuit of rational mastery on the social and natural worlds as part of his project of autonomy. Castoriadis' contribution to a phenomenology of vertical life is doubly significant: first, he extends the notion of 'being alive' (*leben*) to non-living, that is, physical nature. Second, on Castoriadis' account, with the emergence of the living being, the 'subjective instance' is instaurated. Here the *world* as an ultimate horizon is not seen as *apriori* to existential life; it does not exist in the physical world. Rather, the emergence of existential life (*erleben*) is seen as co-emergent with the 'world' as a horizon of (proto)meaning, and new mode of being. Thus, Castoriadis' perspective on the vertical dimensions of life addresses the ontological preconditions of ways of being-in-the-world. In the present context, we will primarily focus on his elucidation of the kosmos and the living being as they pertain to the question of 'life' in its vertical dimensions. The paper concludes that Castoriadis' interpretation of life and his ontology of nature are to be understood as a critical rethinking of *Naturphilosophie* as part of his wider project of autonomy.

Castoriadis' philosophical trajectory can be interpreted through the rethinking of the ancient Greek problematic of *nomos* and *physis* as 'human institution' and 'nature'. Castoriadis' first ontological turn was announced in the publication of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*; it was a regional ontology of the social-historical as part of his project to elucidate the being of *nomos* as self-creating human institution. His second ontological

2. Cornelius Castoriadis *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Translated by Kathleen Blamey, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 1987 [1975]).

3. Following Johann P. Arnason, modernity not reduced to the Enlightenment and its 'unfinished project' (Habermas) and hence Romanticism as its conservative reaction, but is interpreted as a field of tensions comprised of the ongoing conflictual dialogue between the cultural currents of the Enlightenment and Romanticism and their respective world imaginaries. Johann P. Arnason, (1988) *Praxis und Interpretation*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

turn emerged most clearly in the mid 1980s as a general ontology of radical *physis* as *à-être*.<sup>4</sup> His re-thinking of *physis* entailed a broadening of its parameters from his earlier interpretation of it as a normative order for anthropos and was anchored in the rediscovery of its creative element, as part of his radicalization of the classic Aristotelian formulation of *physis* as internal qualitative movement and change (*alloiosis*), to creative emergence. With Castoriadis' increasing emphasis on radical *physis*, his account of ontological creation of form expands from anthropic regions of being to incorporate natural modes and regions of being as well. Thus, what is to be noted during the course of the 1980s is the emergence of a further ontological turn in his thought, summed up in the shift from regional *nomos* to trans-regional *physis*. Castoriadis' later ontology of *physis* shifts from a regional ontology of the social-historical as auto-creative to a general ontology of radically *physis* as *à-être*, to use Castoriadis' own neologism—an *always-becoming-being*. This image of being is one that creates itself in irregular, heterogenous strata. In this vein, the lines of continuity and discontinuity between anthropic and natural regions of being were redrawn, and, as part of that, a phenomenology of life emerges via his reactivation of ancient Greek images of the world, and his reconsideration of time and creation as they pertained to the living being and the physical world.

Castoriadis' later approach to re-thinking *physis* is distinctive: he combines a critique of modern scientific knowledge, and its metaphysical presuppositions, with a re-activation of ancient Greek imaginary schema by way of *naturphilosophical* themes, especially within the context of the idea of—and debates on—auto-poiesis. Although for Castoriadis these began as distinct aspects, ultimately they converged and overlapped. As with Merleau-Ponty, Castoriadis' interpretation of *physis* can be read as a critical re-appropriation of the romantic imaginary of nature, in particular, through a re-activation of the intermittent tradition of *natura naturans/ natura naturata*. Both draw on Schelling, although with Castoriadis it was more implicit where his Fichtean turn in the final chapter of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* proved insufficient to adequately elucidate the creativity of the natural world. However, unlike Merleau-Ponty, Castoriadis also draws more extensively on the ancient Greek imaginary. In this sense, Anaximander's notion of indeterminacy—taken up by Merleau-Ponty—was radicalized by Castoriadis through his elaboration of self-creation. Although Castoriadis finds inspiration in Aristotle for his shift to *physis*, there is also an evident reinvigoration of archaic sources for support, in particular, Pre-Socratic notions of *physis* as an element of being *qua* being; and Hesiod's notion of chaos, especially as it is interwoven with the ordering of cosmos. Castoriadis reinvigorates an ancient Greek schema of being as the entwining of

---

4. See for example several of the essays in Cornelius Castoriadis, Cornelius, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis and the Imagination*, Edited and translated by David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). For further discussion of this aspect to Castoriadis' philosophical development, see Suzi Adams, 'Castoriadis' Shift Towards *Physis*', *Thesis Eleven* 74: 105-112 (London: Sage, 2003), and 'Castoriadis and the Permanent Riddle of the World: Changing Configurations of World Alienation and Worldliness', *Thesis Eleven*, 90 (London: Sage, 2007a).

chaos and cosmos that creates itself as heterogeneous strata and regions.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Castoriadis' reflections on nature also include an engagement with modern scientific forms of knowledge: his interpretation of being as self-animated and heterogeneous is informed by the limitations of the metaphysical presupposition of classical modern science of a fully rational (and rationalizable) world. His argument consistently revolves around his understanding that *what we can know tells us something about how the world is*, that is, in recapitulation of Heidegger's argument in the *Kantbuch*, that ontology and epistemology ultimately entwine.

Within his general ontology of radical *physis*, Castoriadis begins to elucidate two further regional ontologies or—to put it in Merleau-Pontian parlance—dimensions of the vertical world: a philosophy of the living being and a philosophical cosmology. However, as was the case with the interlocking modes of anthropic being, each of the new regional ontologies exceeds strictly regional boundaries: first, the living being is elucidated as part of the poly-regional—or dimensional—ontology of being-for-itself, which crosses the interface of the natural and the social, of *physis* and *nomos*. Second, the philosophical cosmology spills over into Castoriadis' general ontology of radical *physis* as *à-être* as an *always-becoming-being*. Presupposed in his shift to a poly-regional mode of being of the being-for-itself is an ontology of life; the ultimate auto-creativity of trans-regional being provides the ontological preconditions for the emergence of life as existence. Each region, moreover, can be interpreted as 'alive', though in different ways. Coinciding with this phase of Castoriadis' philosophical trajectory was the emergence and increasing importance of the idea of 'auto-poiesis' for a diverse range of especially natural scientific disciplines, and was especially significant in francophonic contexts in the 1980s. The auto-poietic question comprises overlapping and sometimes conflicting approaches that radically challenge mechanistic visions of nature and 'living systems'. Castoriadis' participation in these debates was vigorous and his contribution heterodox.<sup>6</sup>

Castoriadis' interpretation of auto-poiesis as auto-creation has a specific sense—indeed, his critique of most of the proponents of the 'auto-poietic' field as it emerged primarily through the francophone debates of the 1980s, is that it by and large remains trapped within the framework of determinacy, and, consequently, cannot think creation. In his radical formulation of creation as *ex nihilo*, Castoriadis distinguishes between the 'production of difference' and 'the creation of alterity'. The former, for him, remains within identity—or ensemblistic-identitarian—logic: the resultant 'new' form can be reduced to or predicated on its antecedents; it is determinable. The latter, on the other hand, refers to ontological novelty. It holds that the new 'creation' cannot be reduced or predicated on its antecedents—it is not determinable by what precedes it—and, as such, presumes an understanding of being that is radically temporal (a temporality that goes

5. This aspect of his thought is more clearly articulated in his seminars than his published essays. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

6. For a discussion of Castoriadis and the auto-poietic field, see Suzi Adams, 'Castoriadis and auto-poiesis', *Thesis Eleven: Critical Theory and Historical Sociology* 88: 76-91 (London: Sage, 2007).

beyond the 'subjective' and 'objective' divide). On this basis, Castoriadis wants to argue further that creation is *ex nihilo*—that it is absolute.

## THE LIVING KOSMOS

For Castoriadis, the cosmos as auto-poietic—in the strong sense of auto-*creative*—is to be understood in a broad sense as a *living kosmos*. This is not strongly emphasized in his published writings. In an unpublished archival document from 1983, however, Castoriadis identifies various social imaginaries that attempt to make sense of the natural world.<sup>7</sup> Imaginary schemas are as such 'onto-cosmological': each claims to grasp the essence of all that can be said *to be (être)*.<sup>8</sup> Castoriadis divides these imaginaries into two kinds according to the respective meanings of and importance lent to the idea of *inertia* or, alternatively, to the idea of *movement*. His own project was to revitalize a cosmology of movement as creation. First, Castoriadis identifies the classical modern imaginary of western science, which has been dominant, on his account, since Galileo, Descartes and Newton. The modern scientific imaginary views (natural) being as inert, passive and extended: habitually considered in the most general sense as the cosmological object.<sup>9</sup> Although Castoriadis' argument in regards to the imaginary of inertia in modern science tends to be overstated, nonetheless, the two images of an animated nature/world differ in that ultimately the Newtonian version is neither self-moving nor self-creating in any of the meanings that are important for Castoriadis in this context: that is, that of the *auto* and that of *creation* in its alterity to production.<sup>10</sup>

For Castoriadis, when the *auto* is invoked in such contexts, a second imaginary schema is drawn upon: the ancient Greek imaginary, given its classic form by Aristotle. However, he explicitly draws on Plato's image of the cosmos as a living being, broadly understood to illustrate his understanding of 'life' as auto-creative. The ancient Greek picture of the world and of being sees them as possessing their own dynamism (*dynamisme propre*). It is an animated view of the world, where being is seen as '*auto, mouvement—au sens le plus profond—physis, c'est-à-dire poussée, naissance, croissance*'. Here *physis*, although still thought within the limits of the Aristotelian framework, is seen as the most profound sense of qualitative movement with which being itself is endowed. Castoriadis traces the

7. Compte-rendu de la réunion du 'Groupe de réflexion interdisciplinaire' du 17 mars 1983, 'Autonomie et complexité', Rédigé par Yolande Benarrosh. Unpublished document held in the Castoriadis Archives, Paris. in (Bbis A) 1bis: Presse: annonces de parutions et comptes rendus (1979/1989). The minutes are not written by Castoriadis himself, but comprise a detailed summary of his intervention and the ensuing discussion. Its status could be considered similar to Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published seminars on nature.

8. In a different paper, Castoriadis explicitly links myth and religion to Greek imaginary schema. See Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Imaginaire social et changement scientifique' in l'Action locale Bellevue (Eds) *Sens et place des connaissances dans la société*, (Paris: CNRS, 1987), pp. 161-183

9. Castoriadis goes further and points to the prefiguring of inertia as far back as the twelfth century. Castoriadis, 1987 op.cit. , p. 174.

10. A further point is worth mentioning: first, for Castoriadis, one of the chief characteristics of the Greek vision of being as self-moving and self-creating lies in its contrast to the Christian schema, in which, on Castoriadis' account, nature/ being is *neither* self-creative *nor* self-moving, but produced and set into motion externally and Divinely by a Creator-Legislator God.

image of dynamic being to the Pre-Socratic founders of philosophy. Arguing against the reduction of movement to quantitative, local movement, Castoriadis wants to revitalize and radicalize Aristotle's sense of movement as internal and qualitative. Drawing on the Aristotelian distinction between natural being and artefact, Castoriadis highlights the internal push—that is, the dynamic movement—of *physis*. Hence, Castoriadis highlights, in radicalizing Aristotelian *physis*, that *physis* is self-moving and self-forming; in order to be it must give itself its own form.

Castoriadis understands physical nature to be 'alive' in the sense of auto-poietic or auto-creative. His cosmological considerations emerge from his reflections on the interconnectedness of time and creation.<sup>11</sup> He seeks to offer a philosophical articulation of the physical universe—as one reducible neither to a purely scientific nor to a religious imaginary schema—by an elucidation of the overarching meaning of *time*. Castoriadis' dialogue with—and incessant movement between—the ancients and the moderns informs his elucidation. He also draws on archaic mytho-poietic motifs to support his image of the cosmos. Castoriadis' philosophical cosmology, in its radicalization of Aristotle via a rethinking of Kant, continues to resonate with Pre-Socratic—more specifically Ionian—visions of nature (as made up of primordial elements), and the relationship between *physis* and being. He thereby revises the scientific and philosophical entwining of giving shape to the world in the older sense of philosophical cosmology.<sup>12</sup>

From the time of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, and in the wake of Heidegger, Castoriadis has argued that the only way to think being was to think time; in the 1980s he continues to expand and deepen this proposition. A primary part of his concern to develop a philosophical cosmology is, first, to question the inherited interpretation of time—variously expressed—and its tendency to reduce time to a dimension of space, especially as it pertains to the physical world, and, second, to thus offer an interpretation of time at the cosmological level that would be freed from the constraints of space. Castoriadis' argues that traditional approaches to time—both in physics and philosophy—consistently theorize it as a dimension of, or as complementary to space; in so doing, they occlude core aspects of temporality. Thus, for Castoriadis, *overarching time* as such has not been thought by the inherited tradition. He argues that time as the emergence of alterity is not thematized; instead the conception of time remains caught within frameworks of identity which cannot account for *creation*.

Conventional approaches in physics are deficient as they have neither explained satisfactorily the distinctiveness of time from space, nor the distinctive characteristic of time *qua* time. Following Bergson, the 'spectre of the spatialization of time that haunts physics' is the main subject matter of Castoriadis' critique: he argues that time has mostly been interpreted by analogy with space. In mathematical physics, too, if time is merely to be considered as part of a four dimensional manifold, what then makes

11. Castoriadis' writings on cosmology are less systematically developed. See especially Cornelius Castoriadis, Cornelius, 'Time and Creation' in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis and the Imagination*, Translated by David Ames Curtis, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 374-401

12. See Georges Gusdorf, *Le savoir romantique de la nature* (Paris: Payot, 1985)

time distinct from other dimensions? The irreversibility of time is generally called upon as the distinguishing characteristic of time from space: however, Castoriadis argues (or rather, asserts) that the reasons given are inadequate justification. First, it is not certain that all movements in space are irreversible (such as those close to black holes, for example); second, irreversibility is a cosmological ‘riddle’ (in terms of the expansion and contraction of the universe); third, from Boltzmann onwards, irreversibility has not yet been successfully deduced from first principles; fourth, physical irreversibility whilst locally indisputable, is still but a partial fact. In this context, Castoriadis points out that irreversibility has been interpreted in terms of increasing entropy, yet this does not prevent the emergence of new forms at all strata of being, as forms are both created and destroyed. It is, in fact, the creation and destruction of forms that for Castoriadis will elucidate time and its ‘arrow’. The spatialization of time is linked to the deeper problem of the mathematization of space within mathematical physics resulting in the reduction of space to the ensidic layer as an ensidic dimension. A precondition of forms ‘in space’ is their auto-creation of themselves. Castoriadis extends the notion of time as the concrete emergence of forms that constitutes its content. Thus, physical nature too is characterized by the auto-creation of forms and strata. Time, for Castoriadis, is consubstantial and co-emergent with that which is other; it is the auto-poietic dimension of being.

#### THE WORLD OF THE LIVING BEING

Castoriadis’ early philosophical interest was primarily anthropological. In the 1970s an elucidation of a regional ontology of the social-historical as human institution was his prime concern; the living being figured either as a limit case, or as an interesting point of contrast to anthropic modes of being. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a renewed interest in Castoriadis’ elaboration of the being of life via the living being, where he begins to rethink the creativity of non-human forms of nature. This interest coincides with the emergence of the debates on auto-poiesis, and, especially the ‘new emerges in the wake of the innovations of the ‘new biology’ of Varela and Maturana’s *Autopoiesis and Cognition*.<sup>13</sup> For Castoriadis, the problematic of the living being is incompatible with reductionist frameworks of mechanistic nature. In appearing at a certain juncture of being, the living being constitutes a specific type of being and brings into existence, that is, *creates* certain laws, about which it would be empty to affirm their prior existence. The organism creates them at the same time as it creates itself *qua* living being. The final development in Castoriadis’ philosophy of the living being is discernable from the late 1980s and into the 1990s in that it is now more directly linked to the meaning of the Aristotelian soul as imagination and marker of life.<sup>14</sup>

13. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973). Varela and Castoriadis had an ongoing and fruitful dialogue regarding the living being, the implications of its self-creation and the question of biological autonomy.

14. See Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘Psychoanalysis and Philosophy’ in *The Castoriadis Reader*, Edited and translated by David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 348-60; and Cornelius Castoriadis, *Dialogue*

The living being—and with it questions concerning the problematic of a philosophical elucidation of life—emerges as a central theme for Castoriadis' rethinking of radical *physis* and the interpenetration of natural and cultural worlds. His renewed engagement with 'life' at the level of the living being sees the simultaneous re-appearance of the *physis* and *nomos* problematic at a new level of being. During the 1970s the living being, although understood as self-organizing, was not theorized in terms of its self-creation. This changed during the 1980s. Where the living being is now less characterized as self-organizing—which implies an ensidic logic—and more properly theorized in terms of *self-creation*. Castoriadis elucidates the living being in a way that to some extent blurs the boundary between anthropic and non-anthropic regions of being, as part of the emergent poly-regional—or dimensional—ontology of the *being-for-itself*. In re-visiting the living being, Castoriadis not only engages his contemporary Francesco Varela as an interlocutor, but also continues to radicalize and fuse key motifs in Aristotle and Kant. With Castoriadis' growing tendency to interpret the living being as ontologically creative, the latter came to be seen more in continuity with anthropic modes of being. Not only was the living being auto-poietic in the wider sense of being *qua* being, the living being signifies the emergence of an archetypal *self* as auto-poietic and to that extent an imaginary element is present in its self-creation.

Castoriadis' elucidation of the regional ontology of the living being emerges as part of the articulation of a wider dimension of being: the *for-itself*. Indeed, Castoriadis' elucidation of the philosophical presuppositions of life and the living being depends for much of its theoretical significance on its contrast with other modes of being. In the first instance, this spans the poly-regions of the *for-itself*—be it the psyche, or the social-historical—or in the second, in comparison to non-living nature. The dimension of the *for-itself* incorporates six overlapping levels or regions. Four of these Castoriadis designates as 'real': the living being, the human psyche, the social individual, the social-historical. The remaining two are not 'real' but rather point towards an 'emergent capacity' in anthropic being: the human subject, properly speaking, and autonomous society.<sup>15</sup> Castoriadis' elucidations of the living being often occur in the context of wider elucidations of the poly-regional ontology of the *for-itself* and the overlap and demarcation of their respective *niveaux*, especially significant in that this dimension of being incorporates anthropic and non-anthropic regions. Castoriadis now conceives all modes of natural being as auto-poietic, but the living being represents a rupture of inorganic nature, and as such a rupture of and within being. With the emergence of the living being, the 'subjective instance' as the (proto)self first appears with the simultaneous creation (invention) of the world properly speaking, as cosmos: as an instituted order of meaning, and the imaginary element'.

The problematic of the world—which first appears in his thought as a rethinking of phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches to meaning—reappears in Castoriadis'

---

(Paris: Laube, 1999).

15. Cornelius Castoriadis 'Pour-soi et subjectivité' in Bognoux, Daniel; Le Moigne, Jean-Louis and Proulx, Serge (Eds) *Arguments pour une méthode (Autour d'Edgar Morin)* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), pp. 118-127



thought here in the guise of the *Eigenwelt*, which is created by all modes and levels of the *for-itself*. Creation of an *Eigenwelt* not only highlights Castoriadis' shift towards auto-poietic *physis*, it highlights the originality of his contribution to debates on 'life'. Through hermeneutical reconstruction, we can say that for Castoriadis *life* (as *erleben*) is co-emergent with the world *qua* world. Life as existence also heralds the emergence of the creative imagination, which, at the level of the living being, takes the form of the corporeal imagination. Thus we see the emergence of the *imaginary element* as the transcendental precondition of the world; for Castoriadis, the world is created as a horizon of (proto)meaning through the activity of the creative imagination. The living being—as the 'archetypal' being for-itself in what Renaud Barbaras has called an 'additive anthropology' does not merely organize and act in the world in which they find themselves, but create it. The living being, as the archetypal self—the first of diverse subjective instances—creates a world, creates its own world as an 'absolute creation', as opposed to merely organizing the world in which it dwells.<sup>16</sup> That is, the world *qua* world first comes into existence at the ontological level of the living being: 'life', 'world' and 'meaning' are co-emergent.

For Castoriadis, the living being as the archetypal being for-itself is characterized by three interconnected attributes: first, self-finality, second, creation of its own world, and, third, that this *Eigenwelt* is one of representations, affects and intentions.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on Portmann, Castoriadis characterizes auto-finality as the mode by which everything that appears on the living being's horizon is subordinated to the goal of its own conservation, both as a singular living being in terms of self-preservation and as a species in regards to self-reproduction.<sup>18</sup> Auto-finality presumes in turn the *Eigenwelt* in and through which everything must not only appear, but appear as having a meaning for the living being. Here Castoriadis expands his genealogy of knowledge from the anthropic world to the living being to the extension of a genealogy of meaning as essential to the imaginary element (as encountered in the final two chapters of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*). Unlike most thinkers who address the problematic of auto-poiesis, Castoriadis does not use the language of systems. Instead he reintroduces the notion of the being-for-itself. On his account, a self-created world of meaning always exists *for a self*, and is in contrast to the physical regions, where the action of one entity on another has meaning for neither entity. The creation of an *Eigenwelt* and 'information' assumes a 'putting into meaning' or proto-meaning as characteristic of the living being. Central to the idea of the creation of an *Eigenwelt* is the view that nothing can exist for the living being that does not enter the *Eigenwelt* in question, and nothing enters into that world without being organized/ endowed with meaning according to the organization and laws peculiar to that world of the *for-itself* in question. The creation of the world and the world as its own world is *apriori* to the mode of being-in-the-world; its organization will inform and direct modes

16. Castoriadis, *ibid.* p. 121

17. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique: séminaires 1986-1987*, (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

18. See also Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Portman in *Nature* *op.cit.*

of being in-the-world.

Implicit in the creation of an *Eigenwelt* is the imaginative capacity, although not yet the ‘radical imagination’ of the human psyche; the living being exhibits a corporeal imagination in the creation of an *Eigenwelt*. The elemental form of the imagination comes into play in creating ‘the image as image and as that image’, by creating its own world such that anything that it encounters ‘externally’ can only be processed or made ‘meaningful’ by entering into its own world. The living being in its self-constitution of an *Eigenwelt* exhibits three aspects: an aesthetic –noetic (representation and the image—being able to put into image, make an image be, is of ontological importance—or ‘cognition’ in Varela’s terms), affect and intention/ desire.<sup>19</sup> The creaturely *Eigenwelt* consists of presentation, representation and putting into relation various elements to form a world, relative to which the living unity reacts to, tends towards and so forth. Everything that presents itself in this *Eigenwelt* is also affect as a sign of value (positive, negative or neutral). The living being can be characterized as possessing an intention which it is able to translate into action (towards self-conservation). In its self-constitution of an *Eigenwelt*, the *for-itself* exhibits three aspects: an aesthetic—noetic (representation and the image, or the ‘cognitive’ in Varela’s terms), affect, and intention/ desire. The creation of information always involves a *mise en image* and *mise en relation*—that is the dimensions of imaging and relating, or ‘sensorial’ and ‘logical’. Drawing on Aulagnier, Castoriadis argues that ‘staging’—*mise en scène*—already contains some kind of meaning, and ‘putting into meaning’—*mise en sens*—cannot happen without a ‘presentification’ of the sense, which requires a scene.<sup>20</sup> Critiquing Kant further, the receptive and spontaneous aspects of the ‘putting into image/ concept’ is not reducible to a receptivity of impressions (of the X), but involves a spontaneity on the part of all regions of the *for-itself*, including the living being. For Castoriadis, an *Eigenwelt* indicates that Kant’s ‘X’ of the external world is nothing in-itself, rather it is—to take up Fichte—an *Anstoss*, or ‘shock’ which becomes ‘something’ only as the living being forms it—or rather transforms—into something in its own manner: ‘information’ is a creation.<sup>21</sup> As such, the living being does not just ‘represent’ the external world to itself, but rather on Castoriadis’ account, creates an interior, or an archetypal ‘subjective instance’. The living being must be ‘in contact’ with the ‘external all’, select elements in the world in an infinitely selective representation of the world.<sup>22</sup> The living being leans on the ensidic elements of the first natural stratum to create what for it is information; it does not find information as such in nature. The X is transformed and shaped - that is, in some sense, articulated - , but also into relation through recourse to proto-logical categories: pieces of information do not exist in isolation.

At this level of being—that is, with the emergence of the living being—‘existence’ (*erleben*) is given (subjective) meaning by the *for-itself* in rupturing from inorganic being.

19. Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘Done and To Be Done’ in *The Castoriadis Reader*, op.cit. pp. 361-417

20. Aulagnier, P. *La violence de l’interprétation*, Paris: PUF, 1975 ; Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘The State of the Subject Today’, *Thesis Eleven*, 24 (London: Sage, 1989), pp. 5-43

21. Castoriadis, *ibid.* p. 13

22. Castoriadis, 2002 op cit. p. 16

The 'subjective instance' is inaugurated; the physical world is put into meaning. The living being creates the levels of meaning and the world and their intimate connection. The *subjective instance*, as Castoriadis refers to it, is simultaneously the emergence of subjectivity as selfhood writ large.<sup>23</sup> The living being—and regions of the *for-itself* more generally—not only create themselves as new strata of being, but create further strata of being that have *meaning* for them —*as and within a world*—and exist for them, but do not necessarily exist as such in other regions of being. Castoriadis' favourite example of this phenomenon concerns 'colour'. Colours do not exist in the physical world as such, except as vibrations. The living being creates the form of colours as part of its *Eigenwelt*, it brings into existence colours as reality.

Castoriadis' philosophical elucidation of the living being combines critical engagement with scientific auto-poiesis and an explicit re-activation of the philosophical idea of the *Für-sich sein*. It can be interpreted as a partial fusion of Aristotelian and Kantian motifs, although it is no longer purely the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but also of the *Critique of Judgement*. Kant's third *Critique* makes a useful analogy for Castoriadis' trajectory: from the importance of the imagination (as taken up and altered by Kant in the first and second editions of the first *Critique*), to the increasing importance on the creative aspects of nature and aesthetic creation as an oblique form of autonomous questioning, or judgement as evidenced in his later trajectory. In the third *Critique*, Kant embraces the creative and constitutive role of the imagination but without according it ontological status. In turning to Aristotle's classic formulation of *physis*, Castoriadis rediscovers its creative aspect and radicalizes its philosophical implications to encompass all regions of being. In particular, he states that 'the beings (*étants*) of *physis* have in themselves principle of creation of form.'<sup>24</sup> Castoriadis situates himself against the 'causalist' approaches within modern science, where the measurement of local movement in terms of inert bodies is given priority over internal movement, and self-animated movement. The *for-itself* is its own end; Castoriadis analyses this in terms of teleonomy rather than teleology: its finality is self-created for itself. Castoriadis re-interprets and radicalizes Aristotle's classic formulation of *physis* from finalism as a variant of determinism, to self-creation of form. Thus, in terms of the shift in Castoriadis' conception of the living being from the time of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* to the growing importance of radical *physis*, the major discernable shift lies in the move from the living being's capacity to *organize* its world, to creating its own world—with its attendant philosophical implications—by the mid-1980s—and the emergence of 'existence' (*erleben*) as a mode of being.

To sum up, as being for-itself, the living being is its own end and creates its own proper world (*Eigenwelt*), through which no 'information' can enter without being subjected to the laws and determinations of that world. The crucial difference between the living being and other regions of the for-itself is that the living being operates within functional closure—the defunctionalization of the human psyche ruptures the stratum of the living

23. Castoriadis, 1990. op cit. Later developments in Castoriadis' thought highlight the role of the corporeal imagination in the living being and the rethinking of life *vis à vis* the Aristotelian soul.

24. Castoriadis, 1997. op cit. p. 343

being at the anthropic moment. The living being instaurates the ‘subjective instance’ of a proto-self; it constitutes itself as itself—in contrast to inorganic nature—it creates an a unity and an interior, a ‘subjective instance’ and creates the world as kosmos: a world of (proto)meaning. With the advent of the living being, ‘existence’ emerges as a new level of being.

In the 1980s, the lines of continuity and discontinuity between anthropic and non-anthropic being are redefined in variously shifting ways, but there remain nonetheless important points of differentiation between them. This becomes especially clear in Castoriadis’ elucidation of autonomy as it pertains to the various regions of the *for-itself*, as his discussions with Varela’s notion of biological autonomy show.<sup>25</sup>

Castoriadis’ radicalization of *physis* signals not only a return to ancient Greek sources, but a critical reconsideration of the romantic idea of nature. In particular, the rediscovery of the other, eminently creative side to *physis* locates Castoriadis within the intermittent modern tradition of *natura naturans* / *natura naturata*. The creative aspects to nature received the greatest focus with the German *Frühromantiker* as part of the wider, *naturphilosophical* context; Castoriadis’ shift to radical *physis* is to be situated within this milieu, too. In the same vein, Castoriadis’ later philosophical elucidations could be interpreted along the lines of a critical *Naturphilosophie*. Castoriadis’ *Naturphilosophie* can also be linked to later currents of thinking nature and the kosmos—especially as a critique of the hegemony of modern forms of reason or rationality and/ or mechanistic views of the natural world—such as those found in successive stages of romantic thought up to and including the late stage to be found in *Lebensphilosophie*, but, it is important to stress, without the ‘romantic excess’ to which these currents were prone, be it philosophically or politically.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Castoriadis’ later ontology of nature can be understood as a critical *Naturphilosophie*. *Naturphilosophie* is a distinctively German tradition and was most closely identified with German Romantics (especially the *Frühromantiker*).<sup>26</sup> There is neither English nor French equivalent to the term. *Naturphilosophie* refers to a trend that did not so much reject science *tout court* as reject the Galilean (and Kantian) programme of science and its a-historical precepts. *Naturphilosophie* sought to restore the fullness of a total science (Gusdorf 1986: 14), where science is interpreted as part of philosophy and ultimately reabsorbed into it. In this way, it looks to bridge the chasm opened by the Enlightenment current between subject and object, internal and external nature, mind and body and so forth. *Naturphilosophie* signifies a refusal, moreover, to radically separate anthropos from the kosmos in which it dwells: it wishes to restore a meaningful alliance between the two. *Naturphilosophie* is not content to regard the world of appearances and surfaces of things, instead it seeks to

25. See Adams, 2007a op. cit

26. I use the term *Frühromantiker* in the sense given to it by Korff. See H.A. Korff, ‘Das Wesen der Romantik’ in *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Kunde*, No. 43, 1929.

discern visible roots in the invisible, in the act of grasping the cosmos, often at the nexus of poetic and religious motifs and themes. In this vein, it envelops both a philosophical anthropology and philosophy of nature and underscores modes of continuity between the two. It is a truism to observe that some versions of *Naturphilosophie* tended to excess. Three tendencies can be identified. First, they could be too directly rooted in religious traditions, such that strong theosophical undertones blurred the boundaries between theology and philosophy. Second, the idea of creative nature could involve assumptions with things not so easily compatible with nature, such that illegitimate links were made to natural science. Third, *Naturphilosophie* was also meant to apply to non-rational modes of cognition, such as intuition and *Einfühlung*. Nonetheless, the complete rejection of romantic contexts and *Naturphilosophie* needs to be rethought. *Naturphilosophie* was not so much a dismissal of science or rationality, as an attempt to respond to the interpretative challenges posed by wholesale reduction of ontological meaningfulness and lifelessness emerging from some strands of Enlightenment thought, and the attempt to recreate contexts of meaning as part of a critical response. In this respect, too, Castoriadis' interpretation of creative nature as a critical reconsideration of the romantic imaginary of nature can be understood as a critique of the excesses of Enlightenment visions of nature as generally inert and emptied of meaning. His characterization of the creative imagination—to draw on his generic term—is in this vein to be understood not so much as a non-rational but trans-rational element.

I have argued that Castoriadis' response to the question of 'life', especially within the ontological turn in Merleau-Pontian currents of phenomenology, is significant. In rethinking the bifurcation of life into 'being alive' (*leben*) and 'experience of something' (*erleben*), Castoriadis extends 'life' into the physical world, on the one hand, and sees its auto-creation as 'existence' as co-emergent with the world as a proto-horizon of meaning. Central to his image of the world, is his emphasis on the ontological role of the imagination. However, it would be misleading to reduce Castoriadis' philosophy to a question of *life* as auto-poiesis. For Castoriadis, the point of rethinking the ontological assumptions of the 'objective' world was part and parcel of the political project of autonomy as an interrogation of the modern scientific image of the world and its underlying metaphysics. In terms of the parameters of the current discussion, rethinking the question of life—and the lines of continuity between human and non-human worlds—interrogates not only reductionist and scientific approaches to the world, but reminds us, too, that the problematic posed by environmental degradation calls forth a rethinking of institutionalized imaginaries as part of a collectively political—not an individualized ethical—response. Castoriadis' rethinking of the idea of nature and objective knowledge, his turn towards a more romantic conception of nature as creative and even 'alive', and the expansion of his regional ontologies of the living being and cosmology are central to the philosophical aspects of the project of autonomy. They put into question the image of nature that buttresses the cultural project of the 'infinite pursuit of rational mastery' of capitalism and its offshoots.

Castoriadis sees in a critically revived romanticist nature—in a critical re-evaluation

of its Aristotelian roots, and as reactivated by the environmental social movement—a contemporary upsurge of the autonomist moment. As such, it also indicates a deepening entwining and encircling of Romantic and Enlightenment currents in his thought. This is particularly evident in the critique of Enlightenment imaginary of nature as embedded in scientific and capitalist attempts to infinitely master, measure and quantify it, as argued by various versions of the ecological movement, of which Castoriadis sympathetically writes.<sup>27</sup> Not only does the ecological movement seek to set limits on the boundless pursuit of rational mastery, it simultaneously re-embeds nature and the world in reconfigured meaning constellations. Castoriadis' shift towards a trans-regional ontology of radical *physis* and his critical re-activation of romantic sources do not signal the reduction of the social to natural explanations, nor is the social conceived as the outcome of cosmic processes. Indeed, the reverse is true. An ontological perspective that envisages the world as a partial and discontinuous organization of living beings—in the broadest sense of the term—and that considers the successive strata of development as emergent forms of self-organization, is able to incorporate the social-historical domain in a cosmic context of life without reducing it to natural or quasi-religious impulses that would thereby deny its novelty. For these reasons, Castoriadis can only ever be cautiously incorporated within philosophies of life, as for him, any ontology of *anthropos* must be cognizant that human life is centred on life in the *polis*. As such, human 'life' in modernity is not reducible to a Klagesian *Widersache der Seele*, but is an open field of tensions and ongoing dialogue between the cultural projects of meaning and reason and their various social imaginary institutions of the world.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the Castoriadis Association for its kind permission to access unpublished documents in the Castoriadis Archives, Paris. I would particularly like to thank Zoé Castoriadis and Myrto Gondicas for their generous help during my visit to the archives. I would also like to thank Johann Arnason and an anonymous reader for their comments on an earlier draft.

Dr Suzi Adams  
School of Political and Social Inquiry  
Faculty of Arts  
Monash University  
suzi.adams@arts.monash.edu.au

---

27. See Cornelius Castoriadis *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Avec Daniel Cohn-Bendit et le public de Louvain-la-Neuve. Paris: Seuil, 1981; Cornelius Castoriadis, 'La force révolutionnaire de l'écologie', *Les cahiers de Saint-Martin*, 7, 1993, pp. 80-86