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Cornelius Castoriadis, who was born in Greece but worked mainly in France, was a practicing psychoanalyst, cultural and political theorist, and philosopher. Recently, Castoriadis' work has been enjoying some wider recognition, and much of it has been translated into English in the past decade. Castoriadis has developed some seminal inquiries into the inter-relations of subjectivity and culture, focusing specifically on issues of heteronomy and autonomy. In the course of these inquiries, which in my view are themselves highly relevant for contemporary religious reflection, Castoriadis formulates some pointed *critical* arguments concerning the status of religion in relation to these issues. There have also been several other thinkers emerging on the French scene in the past fifteen years or so, quite different in style and background from Castoriadis, who share some of his core concerns with the over-riding issues of autonomy and heteronomy in the relations between individual and society. Here, I will mainly draw upon some ideas of Marcel Gauchet, whose notion of a 'split' within religion will be used to develop a critical augmentation of Castoriadis' arguments concerning religion and heteronomy.

3. In his earlier work, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis established two inter-related notions: the 'radical imaginary,' which describes the open-ended creative and representational capacities of human beings, and the 'social imaginary,' constituting the underlying principles, laws, values, and worldviews of any given culture. As he states: 'History is impossible and inconceivable outside of the *productive* or *creative imagination*, outside of what we have called the *radical imaginary*...'.¹ Importantly, Castoriadis adds that this faculty 'includes the dimension that idealist philosophers called freedom, and which is more appropriately called *indeterminacy*...'.² This 'radical imaginary' is posited as the basis of, and yet as distinct from, the social imaginary significations of particular cultures. It reflects the human capacity to imagine (and hence to think) otherwise than what is; this is why notions of indeterminacy and openness are emphasized. These terms indicate a quality of the imagination quite specific to human beings, whereby representational capacity is at least partially disconnected from functional and utilitarian referents (Castoriadis calls this 'defunctionalization'); this allows a degree of autonomy to the imagination that forms the basis for creative activity and critical reflection.³
4. However, the radical imaginary does not take shape in isolation, apart from shared imaginary institutions. The inter-dependency of self, others and society is essential to Castoriadis' understanding of autonomy, and links it with ethical (and possibly with religious) reflection. Reciprocally, every individual is formed within structures he or she does not control and is at best only partially aware of, and this is related to the problem of heteronomy. These collective structures are described as 'the creation of each historical period, its singular manner of

¹.Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blamey' (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1987), p. 146.

².Idem, emphasis added.

³.Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and' the Imagination*, translated by David Ames Curtis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.150-52.

living, of seeing and conducting its own existence, its world, ...the basis for articulating what does matter and what does not... [which] is nothing other than the *imaginary* of the society or the period considered.⁴ I should note that Castoriadis' social or institutional imaginary shares features of Jacques Lacan's notion of the 'symbolic.' (It is likewise quite different from Lacan's imaginary, which is associated with narcissism.) Each refers to the socially constituted laws and linguistic structures internalized by subjects, enabling differentiated, higher-order reflective and ethical activity. Thus Castoriadis also refers to 'the institution of a world of significations,' linking the imaginary with language in a way that parallels Lacan's symbolic order.⁵ Having said this, however, Castoriadis is in fact often at pains to differentiate his ideas from Lacan's. For instance, he argues that the Lacanian symbolic tends to become a 'trans-historical' category,⁶ and that this serves to prevent 'all possible distinction between a 'de facto validity' and a 'de jure validity'.⁷ He also argues that the Lacanian model focuses too much on 'structure,' thereby excluding what is essential: the *temporality* of social institutions.⁸ In the present context, it is not possible to pass judgement on these arguments in terms of their fairness to Lacan. The point I want to stress is that, in contrasting himself with Lacan, Castoriadis emphasizes social imaginary institutions as specific, as historically and temporally constructed, and as subject to critical analysis and possible transformation. This last point is seen in the de facto/ de jure distinction, whereby Castoriadis invokes a potentially 'higher law' beyond those actually given in particular worlds of established social significations. Here we might ask: What is at stake in this critical distinction, and how does Castoriadis attempt to apply critical and ethical criteria beyond the historically given ones of extant societies?

5. Before pursuing these questions, I should also stress that 'imaginary significations' are constitutive of *any* given society, even in eras of advanced rationalization and technologization. Castoriadis emphasizes that 'paradoxically, ...despite or rather due to this extreme 'rationalization', the life of the modern world is just as dependent on the imaginary as any archaic or historical culture.'⁹ There is no absolute divide between traditional and modernized' imaginary institutions; they simply take different forms. The term Castoriadis coins and repeatedly uses to define the specific mode of thinking and engaging the world in modern technological societies is 'ensemblistic-identitarian' reason. By this he means the attitude that grasps reality as a world of things to be approached in causal-deterministic and mechanistic terms. For Castoriadis, and this is a crucial point for my larger arguments, the instrumental mode of reasoning and functioning, however effective it may be in attaining certain practical ends, is no more 'objective,' no more free of conditioning assumptions, than any other worldview. As he states, 'as ensemblistic-identitarian, this type of thought ('reckoning' and so on) has to be blind to its own axioms, its rules of inference... '¹⁰ Castoriadis also argues that, the more this type of 'instrumental rationality' holds sway, the less we have access to alternate 'ultimate values' offered by different cultures.¹¹ Therefore, the perpetual problem and task is not the elimination of imaginary frameworks, which is impossible, but rather fostering critical reflection on how they function, in their specific social forms. Comparative, critical

⁴ _The Imaginary Institution of Society_, p.145.

⁵ _Ibid_, p.235.

⁶ _Ibid_, p.301.

⁷ _World in Fragments_, p.52.

⁸ _Ibid_, p.184.

⁹ _The Imaginary Institution of Society_, p.156.

¹⁰ _World in Fragments_, p.158.

¹¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, translated by David Ames Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.66.

analyses are crucial to this understanding, and the over-riding evaluative criteria are those of autonomy and heteronomy, which now require some discussion.

6. The relation between the radical or creative imaginary, and the social imaginary of given cultures, is one wherein there is both interdependence and tension; this is essential to Castoriadis' understanding of autonomy. This interdependency indicates that autonomy cannot be understood merely as defining abstracted, isolated individuals, but must also be fostered on the social-political level of institutions.¹² Although Castoriadis is very much in the humanist tradition, he has absorbed and appropriated psychoanalytic and other views concerning both the inner differentiation of the subject, and the formation of the subject through inter-subjective and cultural interaction. These levels of autonomy appear in Castoriadis' argument that 'a society is autonomous not only if it knows that it makes its laws but also if it is up to the task of putting them into question. Likewise...an individual is autonomous if that individual has been able to instaurate another relation between its Unconscious, its past, the conditions under which it lives' and itself as a reflective and deliberative instance.'¹³ In each case, or on each level, the past, the 'foundation' of our predominant attitudes,' needs to be brought into awareness and held open to questioning and reflection. This is why Castoriadis is such a strong advocate of democratic society, not in what he sees as the superficial sense of elected representation, but in the deeper sense of opening 'a space where the activities of thinking and of politics lead to putting into question again and again not only the *given* forms of the social institution and of the social representation of the world but the possible ground for *any* such forms.'¹⁴ Such inquiry into the foundations and assumptions shaping social and individual worlds of meaning Castoriadis terms *reflection*, which, as he emphasizes, requires multiplicity and differentiation that allow dialogue and questioning, both within oneself and within society.¹⁵ With this, it can be seen that autonomy and reflectiveness cannot be posited in any final or substantive form, but indicate a continuing capacity and opportunity to question and change in relation to extant social structures.
7. This prioritization of autonomy, reflection, and questioning is perhaps best understood in relation to their antithesis, heteronomy. The nature of, and relationship between these opposed modalities can be clarified by examining how, in one essay, Castoriadis formulates his notion of autonomy in sharp contrast to that of the biologist Francisco Varela. For Varela, autonomy refers to *closed systems* that operate as much as possible without reference to, or dependence upon anything outside of themselves, which, like his collaborator Humberto Maturana, he refers to as 'autopoiesis' (self-making). In her fine analysis of their work, Katherine Hayles summarizes the position of Maturana and Varela in stating that 'it is precisely closure that guarantees the subject will operate as an autonomous individual.'¹⁶ However, Hayles goes on to argue that 'autopoietic theory, in its zeal to construct an autonomous sphere of action for self-enclosing entities, formulates a description that ironically describes autistic individuals more accurately than it does normally responsive people.'¹⁷ Castoriadis formulates a similar critique, arguing' that 'an extreme but very telling example of what would be the fullest 'autonomy' in Varela's sense, and the fullest heteronomy in my sense, is that of the psychotic person

¹².Cf. Ibid, p.111.

¹³.Ibid, p.87.

¹⁴.Ibid, p.17.

¹⁵.Ibid, p.158.

¹⁶.Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Post-Human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.145.

¹⁷. Ibid, p.148.

suffering from paranoia. This person has created once and for all his own all-encompassing and totally rigid interpretative system, and nothing can ever enter his world without being transformed according to the rules of this system.¹⁸ Closure becomes heteronomy because, as in the example of psychosis, the person is trapped within an interpretative world that is not challenged by alterity, and which therefore cannot be *questioned or changed*. In the same context, Castoriadis briefly mentions 'totalitarianism' as another (more obvious) example of a closed, comprehensive interpretative system. He also offers the view that heteronomy is manifest in 'all religious societies, where rules, principles, laws, meanings, etc., are posited as given once and for all, and their unquestioned and unquestionable character is institutionally guaranteed...'¹⁹ This pejorative understanding of religion is also based on its tendency toward 'total explanation,' a point to which I will return in some detail.

8. For the moment, I want to emphasize that, in contrast to closed systems of any kind, Castoriadis articulates autonomy in *open system* and *interactive* terms. This view draws upon notions he sees as first emerging in ancient Greece, and then again in Western Europe at the end of the Middle ages, 'whereby autonomy in the proper sense is created for the first time: autonomy not as *closure* but as *openness*.' Castoriadis argues that 'for the first time in the history of humanity... we have here a being that brings openly into question its proper laws of existence, its proper existing order.'²⁰ Castoriadis is not arguing that autonomy means dispensing with laws, rather that laws, and indeed all facets of the imaginary institutions of society, are capable of being reflected upon, questioned, and changed. Moreover, this reflective questioning does not spring spontaneously out of the 'rational minds' of individual subjects, but requires the 'imaginary' in both forms. The radical imaginary is a necessary feature of autonomous subjectivity because 'the absolute condition for the possibility of reflectiveness is the imagination' which makes it possible to 'see double, to see *oneself* double, to see *oneself* while seeing oneself as other.'²¹ This single passage indicates that alterity is crucial to autonomy in several ways. I need to be able to distance myself from the internalized social structures shaping my attitudes, and to do this I need to interact with others. Reciprocally, for this interaction to be effective, I must be able to step outside of myself, to 'see double' in order to place myself in the position of an other. This is clearly not the instrumental capacity of 'ensemblistic-identitarian' reason as wielded by the isolated individual. Rather, the sort of reflective ethical capacity Castoriadis describes emerges from, as it were, the inner alterity of the radical imaginary.
9. The distinction between autonomy and heteronomy becomes more pointed as Castoriadis argues that autonomy requires the 'instauration of a self-reflecting and deliberating subjectivity, which has not become a pseudo-rational and socially 'adapted' machine but on the contrary has recognized and freed the radical imagination lying at the core of the psyche.'²² The seemingly rational, socially adapted individual is in fact subject to heteronomy in a form other than overt coercion. This is not the extreme form of a closed individual world in autism or psychosis, nor is it confined to the obvious forms of heteronomy in totalitarian societies. Rather, and more encompassingly, heteronomy reflects the problem of closed modes of subjectivity instituted in unquestioned conformity with predominant societal attitudes. Castoriadis appropriates psychoanalytic language to describe this, stating that the 'ego is largely a social fabrication; it is designed to function in a given social setting and to preserve, continue, and reproduce

¹⁸ _World in Fragments_, p.17.

¹⁹ .Idem.

²⁰ .Idem.

²¹ .Ibid, p.159.

²² .Ibid, p.128.

this setting' that is, the institutions that created it.'²³ Heteronomy for Castoriadis does not simply mean external imposition of fixed laws and norms; it also entails the internalization of institutions, via the ego, which leads to what he calls 'a mutilation of the radical imagination.'²⁴ This mutilation is further described in terms of the closure of imagination correlated with socialization. 'Through this social fabrication of the individual the institution subjugates the singular imagination of the subject and, as a general rule, lets it manifest only in and through dreaming, phantasying, transgression, illness.'²⁵ The conditioning by, and the acquiescence to the social-institutional imaginary is such that our inner reality, our creative imagination, is co-opted: we cannot easily imagine otherwise except in marginalized and pathologized forms. In these forms, the creative imaginary is de-potentiated in terms of its meaningful impact upon the dominant forms of the social imaginary. Therefore, 'what is essential to heteronomy... on the level of the individual, is the domination of an...imaginary which has assumed the function of defining for the subject both reality and desire.'²⁶ Although Castoriadis has a long history of addressing issues related to ideology and totalitarianism, one can see that his analyses of heteronomy address more subtle issues. Heteronomy' is operative any time shared norms and values become automatic and unquestioned, and have taken root in our inner beings in such a way as to curtail imagining and thinking otherwise.

10. I must emphasize that heteronomy is not just a *speculative* problem for Castoriadis. He continually links heteronomy, and the concomitant repression of alterity, directly to issues of oppression and, in an especially powerful essay on the theme, to problems of racism. Specifically, Castoriadis links racism with 'an apparent incapacity to constitute oneself without excluding the other,' which he argues 'is coupled with an apparent inability to exclude others without devaluing and, ultimately, hating them.'²⁷ He also describes this as 'the exclusion of external alterity...'²⁸ While the causes of racism are obviously complex, at least part of the problem connects with heteronomy on both of the levels analyzed by Castoriadis. It is not only that participation in a heteronomously constituted social world can involve cultivating exclusive attitudes toward 'outsiders.' Additionally, the inner mutilation occasioned by this participation, in which the socially conditioned ego is but a fragment of the potentially autonomous personality which has become dissociated from its own radical imaginary, leads to inner conflict and self-hatred. As Castoriadis argues, 'it is this hatred of the self, usually intolerable under its overt form for obvious reasons, that nourishes the most driven forms of the hatred of the other and is discharged in its cruelest and most archaic manifestations.'²⁹ Here the ethical aspects of heteronomy are most apparent. To say that the closed and mutilated human beings produced within heteronomous social worlds 'repress alterity,' is also to say that they are inclined to project these repressed features onto other human beings in a way that contributes to oppression and violence.
11. We may now see with greater clarity why, on the level of internal dynamics, autonomy requires openness, differentiation, and the fostering of inter-relations between conscious and unconscious (i.e., de-repression of the imagination). The development of this condition is intrinsically connected with social institutions that enable and foster questioning, rather than

²³.Ibid, p.131.

²⁴.Ibid, p.133.

²⁵.Ibid, p.264.

²⁶ _The Imaginary Institution of Society_, p.103.

²⁷ _World in Fragments_, p.23.

²⁸.Ibid, p.25.

²⁹.Ibid, p.29.

repressing reflection. 'Autonomy is not Cartesian, still less Sartrean freedom, the lightning stroke without density or attachment... individual autonomy arises only under heavily instituted conditions.'³⁰ Thus, liberation of imaginary capacities to see otherwise is partially dependent on social institutions that cultivate reflection. In this regard, Castoriadis introduces the ancient Greek notion of *paideia*, which expresses pedagogy in the broad sense of acculturation, of cultivating the potential of the human person across a spectrum of faculties.³¹ *Paideia* connects the circuit between subjectivity and society, or, between the radical and the social imaginary, that sustains autonomy and reflection.

12. Castoriadis' arguments concerning the need for social institutions fostering autonomy indicate an intermediary space that is at once cultural and psychological. This is a space where representations embodying shared values are shaped and re-shaped, and it is neither reducible to wishes and fantasies, nor subject to strictly empirical criteria of validation. Would it not be possible to understand religious formations, its scriptures, symbols, and concepts as occupying such an interstitial position? In this view, religion can be a dimension of creative and constituting imaginary (or symbolic) constructions that allow humans to inhabit worlds of meaning structured by ethical ideals, and which yet provide resources for continued questioning and modification of those very same constructed worlds.³² Because reflection and autonomy are intrinsically connected with an ethical dimension, addressing human interactions on inter-personal and inter-cultural levels, Castoriadis' analyses would seem to be highly relevant to religious inquiry.
13. Having said this, it is clear that the project of fostering social and individual autonomy faces strong resistance in the tendency of all societies to maintain themselves as they are, which means suppressing certain kinds of questioning. 'Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world... . Its own identity is nothing but this 'system of interpretation', the world it creates. And that is why (like every individual) it perceives as a mortal threat any attack upon this system of interpretation....'³³ Here we return explicitly to the problem of religion, which appears in many places in Castoriadis' writings, *always as an example of a heteronomous social institution and a related closed mode of subjectivity*. In an important essay specifically on the topic of religion, Castoriadis links religion to the 'self-defense' of the instituted social imaginary. He argues that the institution of society, in maintaining itself, 'posits in effect, that being is signification and that (*social*) signification belongs to being. Such is the meaning of the *religious* core of the institution of all known societies... '³⁴ He further argues that 'the enigma of heteronomous society and the enigma of religion are, in very large part, one and the same enigma.'³⁵ Thus, religion becomes a name not for what is illusory or unprovable, as in empiricist critiques, but for the tendency of imaginary institutions, which are necessarily constitutive of social existence, to identify themselves with ontological realities, thereby positing themselves as exterior and heteronomous to human activity and reflection.
14. Castoriadis seems to be questioning *all* historical religious formations; at the same time, he is using the term 'religion' more generally, to refer to *tendencies to close imaginary worlds and to*

³⁰ Ibid, p.122.

³¹ Ibid, p.132.

³² I develop such an interpretation of religion, within a psychoanalytic framework, in *The Other Freud: Religion, Culture and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999).

³³ 'World in Fragments', p.9.

³⁴ Ibid, p.316. One might note parallels with Peter Berger's discussions of religion, legitimation, and reality maintenance in *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

³⁵ 'World in Fragments', p.329.

suppress questioning and alterity. For Castoriadis the issue is not simply one of eliminating the vestiges of the historical religions in seemingly advanced and secularized forms of society. Rather, as we have seen, heteronomy persists, even in secular, democratic, technological societies, in the form of the repression and ‘mutilation’ of the radical imaginary. This closure of the imagination seems to be Castoriadis’ main concern, to which the critique of religion is attached as both a specific example and a general metaphor. When he argues that ‘religion denies the radical imaginary and puts in its place a particular imaginary creation,’³⁶ this mirrors his more general comments concerning socially-constituted heteronomy as imposing rigid, encompassing, pre-defined meaning systems upon the personality.

15. However, beyond generally associating religion and heteronomy, Castoriadis develops more specific arguments about religion that are quite revealing. He states that ‘what some have called the need for religion corresponds to the refusal on the part of human beings to recognize absolute alterity, the limit of all established signification... the death dwelling within every life, the non-sense bordering on and penetrating all sense.’³⁷ Interestingly, Castoriadis opposes trends evident in much postmodern religious thought, and sees the religious as ultimately *denying* alterity, the unthought beyond instituted signification. This is because, as he puts it, ‘social imaginary significations have been in the main and in their essence ‘religious’: they have united recognition of the Abyss with its covering over.’³⁸ As soon as the Abyss ‘the unknown, the possible, the other perpetually lurking beyond all finite and limited human imaginary constructions’ becomes *named*, and particularly when it is *named definitively and absolutely*, it is no longer the Abyss, but has become domesticated and familiarized. Most significant here is this very language of the Abyss as the unformed, open, infinite nature of reality, and the question of its mode of engagement and representation by human beings. This is inferred as that which is obscured by instituted heteronomy; yet it is also what might shake and open heteronomous structures by indicating an alterity always necessarily beyond full realization and expression. For Castoriadis, however, the critical function of the always other indicated by the Abyss is depotentiated by religious discourse. ‘The Sacred is the reified and instituted simulacrum of the Abyss...’ that is, a set of images and concepts that stand in for, and thereby repress, reflection on the alterity which perpetually eludes full signification. Hence, Castoriadis continues, ‘every religion is *idolatry*’ or is not socially effective religion. In religion, words themselves ‘sacred words’ function, and can only function, as *idols*.’³⁹ Castoriadis assumes that all religion, all discourse on the sacred, is literalized. He qualifies this by stating that it must be idolatrous *if it is to be socially effective*, but in some ways this is the heart of the matter for him; he is not interested in religion as something private, but only insofar as it relates to social and institutional issues (indeed, isolating a purely ‘private’ sphere of religiosity would be a somewhat illusory undertaking insofar as the private is always affected by the social and cultural). Most importantly and, I think, revealingly, in all of these passages Castoriadis *uses religious language and concepts—the abyss, alterity, idolatry—against religion*.
16. I do not wish to minimize the significance of Castoriadis’ critique, which is as apposite and crucial today as at any point in history, both in terms of a specific critique of religion in its dogmatic institutionalized forms, and as a critique of all heteronomous tendencies within

³⁶.Ibid, p.326.

³⁷.Ibid, p.324.

³⁸.Idem.

³⁹.Ibid, p.325, emphasis added.

societies. However, does not the use of religious language within a critique of religion imply a *split within religion*? Does it not indicate another possible form of religion that recognizes the Abyss, does not cover this over, hence does not 'mutilate' the radical imagination? Clearly *iconoclasm* is one such religious notion that provides an internal resistance to closure; iconoclasm understood not as the abolition of all images, but as a principle of de-literalizing and de-reifying closed culturally-established representations. It seems highly significant that Castoriadis invokes this concept in attempting to oppose the imaginary closure that generates heteronomy. This would seem to question the adequacy of his sweeping critique of all religion, of everything that might call itself religion. Resisting this comprehensive critique, while yet maintaining focus on the problem of heteronomy, can open the way to a more differentiated understanding of, or put more strongly, a splitting of religion. I want to develop a line of thinking that does not retreat into a religiosity that is merely a privatized and privileged space protected from the demands of knowledge and the responsibilities of inter-personal societal existence. Rather, I want to explore the question of how religion might be a tool for reflection fostering autonomy precisely in Castoriadis' terms.

17. In light of the issue of splitting religion that emerges from Castoriadis' analyses, it is instructive to introduce certain arguments from the work of Marcel Gauchet. Rather than simply locating religion on the side of heteronomy over against autonomy, Gauchet explicitly tries to establish a *split within religion itself*. He articulates this splitting specifically in terms of an historical analysis of the influence of the monotheistic traditions of Judaism and Christianity upon the formation of the modern Western world, but his arguments would seem to have broader implications for understanding religion in its diverse manifestations.
18. On the surface, Gauchet seems to have a more positive view of contemporary Western society than does Castoriadis' for whom heteronomy remains a problem related to the 'mutilation of the radical imaginary' despite apparent advances in secularization, individualization, and democratization. Gauchet's analysis begins by posing the question of the source of what he calls 'the Western world's radical originality,' arguing that this derives from a 'restructuring [that] originated within religion [by which] it escaped from and reversed its original religious orientation.'⁴⁰ Much like Castoriadis, Gauchet understands the 'original' or 'essential' orientation of *all* religion as based on heteronomy and hierarchy. Of course, he freely admits that he is engaging in speculation here. His aim is not to formulate a detailed historical analysis, but to construct an 'ideal model' designed to clarify certain key characteristics of contemporary Western society.⁴¹ For Gauchet, the two organizational modalities of heteronomy and hierarchy are linked, insofar as hierarchy attempts to institute a direct mediation of the conceived ontological order of things into the spheres of social, political, and subjective organization. By contrast, the predominance of individualistic activity in the attitudes and institutions of the modern West means that 'our social order differs so radically from previous ones by having successfully *reversed heteronomy on every level*.'⁴² In this regard, Gauchet posits two core orientations supported by human societies: 'either a bias in favor of the priority of the world and the law of things; or one in favor of the priority of humans and their creative activity.'⁴³ Insofar as this parallels the distinction between heteronomy and autonomy, Gauchet tends to see the modern West as embodying the latter in an unprecedented way.

⁴⁰.Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, translated by Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.3.

⁴¹.Ibid, p.46.

⁴².Ibid, p.4 (emphasis added).

⁴³.Ibid, p.11.

19. The first point to be made is that, granting *some* advance in issues of freedom, democracy, and autonomy in modern Western societies (which as we saw Castoriadis also proclaims), Gauchet sees these accomplishments as *both a turning away from religion and as fostered by religion*. As noted, Gauchet begins by associating religion with heteronomy, stating, for example, that 'the religious is the principle of mobility placed in the service of inertia, it is the principle of transformation mobilized to protect the inviolability of things, it is the power of negation wholly redirected toward accepting and renewing the established law.'⁴⁴ His argument holds that religion is the means whereby humans deny and obscure their own creative activity of constructing myths, symbols, laws, and values, by attributing these to an external source, which he refers to as *self-negation*. Significantly, he adds: 'it is as if whatever caused man to be what he is was so unbearable that he had no choice but to repress it immediately.'⁴⁵ This comment offers an important clue concerning the psychological tendencies underpinning heteronomy.
20. In contrast with this repression of human world-building, Gauchet traces features of monotheistic religion, first in Judaism and later in Christianity, which he sees as giving rise to the inter-related tendencies of modern individualism, autonomy, critical questioning, and world-altering activity (technology). Crucial to this argument is an analysis of metaphysical and theological concepts and representations that relates these seemingly 'abstract' endeavors to the ways in which human beings understand themselves, their relations with each other, and with the world. Gauchet argues that, with the positing of an omnipotent divine being, 'the order of things is determined by the action of a single will, ...something with which we can *communicate*, yet must be *deciphered* and *interpreted*.'⁴⁶ Part of the argument here concerns the distancing of the divine principle from intermediary explanatory forms, which leads not only to a sense of otherness and enigma, but also to an active, interpretative orientation towards this mystery. Another part of the argument concerns the need to reconcile the vicissitudes of worldly life—such as unjust suffering and failure—with the activities of a benevolent, omnipotent deity. In the monotheistic universe, Gauchet argues, 'ethics became problematic. Whereas previously ethics was basically positive, it now mainly tended to raise questions.'⁴⁷ In this way, the 'otherness' of God becomes connected with ethical questioning. As Gauchet puts it 'the paradox is that an increase in a figurative or experienced otherness corresponds to a decrease in an actually implemented otherness; strengthening the image of the Other involves an actual decline in dependence on it.'⁴⁸ As representations of what is considered to be divine become *distanced from and other to* any immediate, instituted, hierarchically-structured ordering of the experienced world, a space opens for human reflection. In this regard, Gauchet argues that the postulation of a 'God who is other' provided the 'metaphysical grounds for the possible dissolution of the hierarchical principle...'⁴⁹ As with Castoriadis, this making-other may also be understood in relation to the related notions of *the Abyss and iconoclasm*. The latter provides a principle recognizing that no interpretation or representation can ever be total or final in structuring human social existence along lines of meaning, purpose, and value. This recognition can serve to precipitate ongoing reflective questioning ameliorating existing structures. Therefore, Gauchet speaks of 'transcendence understood as a dynamic process

⁴⁴.Ibid, p.22.

⁴⁵.Ibid, p.26.

⁴⁶.Ibid, p.52.

⁴⁷.Ibid, p.110.

⁴⁸.Ibid, p.51.

⁴⁹.Ibid, p.82.

with an in-built capacity to unfold beyond its rigid doctrinal formulation.⁵⁰ This is where a splitting internal to the life of religious reflection can be discerned.

21. Metaphysics, in postulating a principle of irreducible alterity, can be said to deconstruct itself in its mode of positing closed and hierarchically organized systems. The Other can never be fully absorbed into representational forms, engendering a necessary remainder relativizing the claims of those forms and the structures they support to be complete or fully adequate. This splitting, in which, 'personal mediation turned against institutional mediation,'⁵¹ generates an ongoing process of questioning and potential transformation. The tension on the metaphysical or theological level of doctrine, that is, in the religious imaginary, fosters a splitting between: a) autonomous reflection undertaken by individuals and communities who, as it were, instaurate religious alterity and iconoclasm in their pursuit of truth and meaning beyond any totalized formation, and b) the heteronomous, institutionalized forms of the religious imaginary which maintain a hierarchical world by claiming to mediate directly 'truth' on an absolute level. Gauchet goes one step further in his analysis. He notes that a tension is maintained between 'God's otherness,' or the principle of alterity, and the 'legitimation of the terrestrial sphere' symbolized in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. This tension engenders an active and open-ended relation toward reality. Thus, 'the stage was set for a development totally opposed to any known religious tradition, namely, the combination of God's deepening call [i.e., the conceptualization of otherness relativizing things as they are] with a simultaneous deepening interest in the world.'⁵² The final link in Gauchet's argument is that, in conjoining a call to transcendence with a focus on immanence, 'reflective subjectivity becomes active, world-transforming subjectivity' a key attribute of modern, secularized, technological societies. (Here Gauchet acknowledges his debt to Max Weber's analysis of the inner worldly asceticism evident in Protestant Christianity, but he sees this as one element in a much more sweeping process.)⁵³
22. Gauchet's divergence from Castoriadis on the issue of religion's contribution to modernity is associated with a quite different evaluation of the impact of ancient Greece. For example, Gauchet argues that 'Christian speculation ...allow[ed] the world to be grasped as an object, and ... human actors to set themselves up as cognitive subjects radically detached from the world-as-object. All this was totally foreign to Greek reason, which was organized by the primacy of the all-inclusive One.'⁵⁴ Further connecting the speculative and social-political realms, Gauchet adds that the 'limits of Greek thought compared to modern thought correspond precisely with the limits of Greek democracy, compared to modern political individualism.'⁵⁵ Gauchet's evaluation of ancient Greece's relation to modern democratic individualism is at least partially conditioned by his overall concern to illustrate the unique contributions of the Jewish and Christian traditions. He has, however, been criticized on this point. For example, Pierre Manent argues that Gauchet inadequately evaluates the Greek contribution to modern democracy.⁵⁶ However, other contemporary theorists support Gauchet in arguing for the profound influence of the Biblical tradition on the rise of Western democracy, and for shaping

⁵⁰.Ibid, p.62.

⁵¹.Ibid, p.83.

⁵².Ibid, p.85.

⁵³.Ibid, p.91.

⁵⁴.Ibid, p.147.

⁵⁵.Idem.

⁵⁶.See Pierre Manent, 'The Modern State' in *New French Thought: Political Philosophy*, edited by Mark Lilla (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.124.

notions of individual rights and freedoms, while qualifying this by also noting the significance of Classical sources. Blandine Kriegel, in *The State and the Rule of Law*, points out that modern notions of law draw from three sources: 'Greek natural law, Roman civil law, and Jewish moral law.'⁵⁷ Most importantly for our concerns, she specifically argues that one of the conditions for a doctrine of human rights is that 'human beings must be recognized as having value,' and she emphasizes that this 'idea of the human being is biblical' rather than Greek.⁵⁸ Of course, Kriegel also raises the question of whether the use of scripture, which was pervasive in the writings of the early moderns, constitutes 'an intrusion of religion into politics.' Her answer is: 'Yes and no. In the absence of a juridical model, the use made of scripture was finely tuned to grant entry only to its moral teachings and to *filter out its institutional structure*.'⁵⁹ In Kriegel's analysis, the Biblical tradition has provided resources contributing to the rise of autonomy and democracy, and these resources can be separated, both conceptually and in their historical influence, from institutional forms that take on a heteronomous aspect.

23. Kriegel's comments concerning separation of the moral from the institutional in the modern liberal appropriation of religious ideas and values augment our understanding of the two sides to religion formulated by Gauchet. He refers to this as 'an irreversible split between two tendencies reflecting dogma's inner tensions: on the one hand, there is a tendency to continually reinvent God's difference; and opposed to this, an unshakable conservative tendency to safeguard a living bond between heaven and earth.'⁶⁰ Now, it is this latter tendency, understandable as it may be, that confirms Castoriadis' association of 'religion' with heteronomous orientations that idolatrously cover over alterity and the Abyss. Gauchet's contribution is to provide tools for a critical distinction that locates heteronomy as one pole within a dynamic tension internal to religion(s). This allows us to draw upon the potentially transformative resources of religious reflection and imagination in the face of the crises of meaning and ethical orientation associated with the ever-evolving global-market instrumental-technological mass-media culture of the present. At the same time, Gauchet's awareness of problematic heteronomous tendencies in religion, and his maintenance of a critical splitting, remain essential in order to avoid the retrogressive bypassing of the Enlightenment emphasis on differentiated autonomous reflection that characterizes many contemporary calls for a return to religious values.
24. This returns us to the issue I previously bracketed: is the modern West, according to the proclaimed criteria of de-hierarchization, increased autonomy, and world-transforming technology as much an unmitigated triumph as Gauchet at first glance seems to believe? Are the contemporary emphases on, for example, unchecked technological proliferation or self-centered individualism, not also subject to problems of a heteronomous repression of the imaginary in Castoriadis' sense? Do they not obscure other perspectives and possibilities, including ones with ethical import?
25. In fact, towards the end of his analysis Gauchet raises a number of issues which parallel and supplement Castoriadis' arguments. For example, Gauchet discusses the displacement from transcendent to immanent structures that 'gives rise to a new category of sacred beings, abstract individuals, collective apparitions, that we belong to and which crush us, immanent

⁵⁷.Blandine Kriegel, *The State and the Rule of Law*, translated by Marc A. Lepain and Jeffrey C. Cohen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.51.

⁵⁸.Ibid, p.34.

⁵⁹.Ibid, p.61 (emphasis added).

⁶⁰._The Disenchantment of the World_, p.60.

deities which, though never seen, continue to receive our devotion: the invisible State and the everlasting Nation.⁶¹ As they evolve historically, these institutions are no longer understood as literally deriving from an extra-human source. Yet, despite increasing recognition of their humanly constructed origins, social institutions (the instituted imaginary) retain an independence from human reflection and action, as well as an opacity that makes it difficult to attain awareness of how they influence us, and how they might be changed. Thus Gauchet speaks of 'the imperatives that condition and regulate our actions' and notes that 'these imperatives have not become clearer by ceasing to be externally imposed.'⁶² He repeats the point later in the text, arguing that 'bringing the social foundation back among humans, placing it within their reach, and making it wholly human, does not mean putting it directly in their possession.'⁶³ From this and other such arguments he concludes that 'we are no longer at odds with the gods but with ourselves.'⁶⁴

26. Gauchet seems less concerned with the lingering role of institutionalized religions in the contemporary world than with the after-effects and new tasks arising from the transition to 'secular' modernity. He allows, of course, that religions in their traditional forms still exert a powerful influence on the lives of many individuals and sub-groups, but argues that this has become disconnected from predominant social attitudes and mores.⁶⁵ If we grant some general accuracy to this analysis, the issues Gauchet opens up concern the intransigent quality of conditioning forces in societies which are no longer heteronomous in the obvious sense, and the question of possible resources for reflection and for furthering autonomy. Where Gauchet differs from Castoriadis, and here he consistently follows through on the splitting of religion he has articulated, is in understanding issues of reflective ethical subjectivity as *transmuted versions of religious problems*, once transcendence has been liberated from models emphasizing hierarchy and stasis. Therefore, the 'splitting' he has traced as a historical process is not something completed once and for all, but constitutes an ongoing task of reflection.
27. One area where the issue of subjectivity arises as an ethical problem is in relation to entrenched Western notions of individualism. Both Gauchet and Castoriadis see atomized individualism as a modality of subjectivity distinct from reflective autonomy. We saw this in Castoriadis' differentiation between autonomy and the closed 'autopoiesis' of Varela. Elsewhere, Castoriadis emphasizes that, insofar as autonomy is correlated with democracy 'it can only be, *de facto* as well as *de jure*, self-limitation.'⁶⁶ Likewise, for Gauchet the development of modern individualism becomes warped insofar as it tends to deny sociability.⁶⁷ This is a problem because individualism represses the inter-dependency of self and other, represses alterity, and thus, as we saw in Castoriadis' arguments, actually instates a form of closure. Here, I want simply to point out how religious issues of meaning and ethics reappear in connection with the task of fostering autonomy in a way that acknowledges the need for self-limitation in relation to others. A fine analysis of these issues has been formulated by Alain Renaut, who differentiates between 'humanism (understood as the valorization of autonomy) and individ-

⁶¹.Ibid, p.90.

⁶².Ibid, p.104.

⁶³.Ibid, p.165.

⁶⁴.Idem.

⁶⁵.Ibid, p.163. It should be clear that Gauchet's arguments cannot be reduced to a statistical level of analysis concerning proclaimed religious belief; they rather concern the over-riding ends and values shaping contemporary Western societies.

⁶⁶.Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, p.173.

⁶⁷._The Disenchantment of the World_,' p.95.

ualism (as the valorization of independence).⁶⁸ For Renault, the key to this distinction is that autonomy accepts, and indeed requires, laws, norms, and limits on independence in order to foster ethical inter-connections between subjects.⁶⁹ This argument augments Gauchet's sense of how problems related to religion become transmuted into an ethics based on inner-worldly relations with the other. Renault, following this line of thought, points to the seminal inter-connections between religion, ethics and 'thinking of subjectivity as transcendence, and of transcendence as communication' with reference to the work of Emmanuel Levinas.⁷⁰ In relation to issues of autonomy, all of these thinkers emphasize that openness to a pluralized alterity, rather than either monadological individualism or conformity within heteronomous mass structures, is required to reflect on and transform the closed formations of culturally constituted subjects.

28. What kind of a version of 'religion' emerges from all of this? The question concerns the status of historically and culturally constituted representations informing our values and ethical orientations, and how we relate to them. With regard to this issue, Luc Ferry speaks of the need to approach religious and metaphysical categories in what he terms a *de-fetishized* manner. 'Fetishizing' (a term common to both Marxist and Freudian discourse), is used by Ferry in more ideologically neutral terms to describe a process whereby the mental activity leading to an idea or concept is obscured, so that the concept is treated as an object disconnected from its constituting history.⁷¹ By contrast, de-fetishization allows religious categories to act as 'principles of reflection' by which we critically engage ethical issues on the interpersonal and social levels.⁷² This is precisely the antithesis of the 'total explanation' critiqued by Castoriadis, because it is characterized by reflective guidelines that are altered as they are applied in new situations. Similarly, Peter Dews states with regard to de-literalized metaphysics, that it 'does not search for bedrock, but rather helps to hold open those fragile horizons of significance which lie *beyond* the dispersed and compartmentalized forms of modern inquiry.'⁷³
29. Thus, one might understand religious discourse not as pointing to an unquestioned order which institutes heteronomy, but as pointing ahead, to possibility. In this form, religion serves as a social vehicle for the imaginary 'doubling' Castoriadis speaks of as necessary for ethical reflection. That is, religion offers a set of images, symbols, principles and values that always maintain a sense of what is *other than* any existing social forms. It thereby provides a critical reference for augmenting those forms in terms of their adequacy in instituting principles such as freedom, justice, equality, and compassion. Here, religion becomes a discourse of alterity and of the Abyss, guided by the principle of iconoclasm. It does not offer fixed transcendentals or ideals instated within closed hierarchical systems, but rather presents heuristic principles that both question, from an ethical standpoint, extant forms of the social imaginary, and also offer regulative and imaginative guidance to the future-oriented project of autonomous

⁶⁸ Alain Renault, *The Era of the Individual: A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise and Franklin Philip (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.19.

⁶⁹ See Ibid, pp.19 and 39.

⁷⁰ See Ibid, p.148. The reference to Levinas is germane to the issue of founding ethics and religion upon inter-human relations. However, it also raises a number of potentially fascinating debates. For example, how might Levinas' declaration of an 'ethics of heteronomy' stand in relation to the pointed critiques of heteronomy of both Castoriadis and Gauchet? While this issue cannot be properly addressed here, suffice it to say that all three thinkers share a model of ethical subjectivity that requires interconnectedness with others.

⁷¹ See Luc Ferry, *Political Philosophy 2: The System of Philosophies of History*, translated by Franklin Philip (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 85, and cf. p.163.

⁷² Ibid, p.159.

⁷³ Peter Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1995), p.14.

subjectivity-in-society.

Notes

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