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INTERPRETATION AND BEING

Abstract: Despite Castoriadis's animosity towards the idea that his work has anything to do with hermeneutics, it does. In this paper I endeavor to expose the hermeneutical dimension inherent to Castoriadis's work and to explore some of the hermeneutical problems which his work opens up. This leads me into discussions of such matters as the relationship between the stratification of Being and its exploration, the nature of ensemblization and the ensidic dimension of Being, and the nature and significance of determination in the human and particularly the social-historical realm.

Keywords: Being Determinacy Ensemblization Hermeneutics
Interpretation

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(A short note on terminology before I begin. The term ‘ensemblization’ features frequently in this text. In the simplest possible terms this means to make set-like. What I want to bring to your attention is a disparity in Castoriadis’s usage of the term between ensemblization as ‘making set-like’ or ‘making more set-like’ and ensemblization as ‘making very set-like’, even on occasion ‘making into a set or sets’. The difference between these two interpretations of the term has implications more far-reaching than may be immediately apparent. Some of these may become clearer in the context of my short discussion of mathematics towards the end of this paper. In what follows, I use ensemblization in the first or broader sense, but when I refer to Castoriadis’s usage of the term it is often meant in the second or narrower sense. I leave it to you to decide whether this is significant and how.)

Why is it that ‘hermeneutics’ is such a dirty word in Castoriadis’s lexicon? From Castoriadis’s own point of view, we can see that he rejects hermeneutics for two distinct but related reasons. The first is philosophical: he believes (rightly or wrongly) that the hermeneutical tradition underestimates the importance of cultural creation. He assumes that ‘interpretation’ must be understood principally in terms of an encounter with a pre-existing truth or meaning, and for this reason he rejects any notion that the relationship between social imaginary significations and ‘the world’ can be regarded as interpretive. ‘The world’ in itself has no ‘meaning’; meanings arise within the world as they are created by the subjects for whom they exist. (1997a: 363-4) The second reason is cultural: Castoriadis believes that since the second world war Western culture has entered a period of decline which has involved, amongst other things, a diminution of cultural creativity. This reflects a rejection of the very notions of the new and of creativity which is philosophically justified by the idea that tradition is all-embracing and inescapable, that novelty is an illusion, and that radical social and cultural change is more often suffered than made, and when it is made, almost inevitably produces results which diminish freedom. This line of thought he associates with thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida. The result is a ‘retreat’ into interpretation, in which a re-reading of the history of ideas replaces any attempt to re-think ‘what is’. (1991: 226; 1997b: 40)

Behind these objections lies an interpretation of ‘interpretation’ that is plainly and surprisingly naïve. Creativity has no place in this understanding of interpretation; in fact the two are regarded as mutually exclusive. This supposed antithesis is, of course, completely illusory. What is more, his denials and disparagements notwithstanding, Castoriadis’s own work goes a long way towards exposing it as such.

What he shows is that, while creation is a more extensive category than interpretation, so that not all creation can be reduced to interpretation, all interpretation is necessarily creation.

As I shall attempt to show, Castoriadis's rejection of hermeneutics is unacceptable; for one reason, because of the way his own work addresses and opens up hermeneutical questions. Acknowledging, as Castoriadis does, that representations are undetermined creations of the subjects for whom they exist does not, as Castoriadis seems to think, render the notion of interpretation inadmissible. On the contrary, it brings to the fore the inevitability and irreducibility of the problem of interpretation. As Arnason (1989) points out, this hermeneutical problematic appears in Castoriadis's work as soon as the question of a relationship between imaginary significations and the first natural stratum is raised; or more generally, as soon as the notion of 'leaning on' is introduced, in any of its various senses and contexts.

To begin with a specific hermeneutical problem, albeit one with very broad implications: according to Castoriadis, the history of science shows us that we cannot ensemblize 'what is' in its totality, that we can do so only "in fragments". (1997c: 372) For him, this fragmentary character of our knowledge reflects the fractured, heterogeneous nature of the object of this knowledge: the 'world'.

The physical world is ensidizable (mathematizable). It is not so "in various ways" (supposedly arbitrary ones, so that "anything goes"); there are not two gravitational theories for ordinary phenomena, from the molecule to the galaxy, there is only one. Rather it is so *in other ways*, and thus *according to* which *stratum* of the world one considers... (1997c: 369)

The correspondence which Castoriadis seems to be postulating here between different ensemblizations – different theoretical frameworks with different axioms – and different ontological strata is, unfortunately, far too simplistic, and it ignores the very factors which Castoriadis himself is usually most concerned to emphasize. The physical world is ensemblizable in various ways because this world incorporates indeterminacy (it is a magma), and because our ensemblizations of it are our creations. Castoriadis is perfectly aware of this (the stratum of the world one considers or discovers, one also "constructs" and "creates" (1997c: 369)), but he seems not to recognize its broader implications. In attempting to defend his thesis that the fragmentary character of scientific ensemblizations reflects differences in ontological strata, Castoriadis draws on an example which defeats his own proposition: the supersession

of Newtonian mechanics by relativity theory. (1997c: 366-; 1984a: 171) I'm afraid I can't go into detail about this here. Suffice it to say that what the passage from Newtonian mechanics to relativity indicates is not the correspondence between different ensemblizations and different ontological strata, but the existence of different ensemblizations pertaining to one and the same stratum.

If the movement from Newtonian mechanics to relativity seems to resemble, say, the movement from classical determinism to quantum probabilism (which does indeed appear to correspond to a difference between ontological strata), this is because the movement of scientific knowledge itself can be imagined as a 'peeling back of layers', an 'uncovering' which seeks always to go 'deeper'. This layering, however, this stratification, may not and will not always correspond to an ontological rift. We can posit some rules of thumb for judging whether or not this might be the case. Castoriadis argues that the postulate of ontological stratification suggests that it is a mistake to oppose a 'phenomenal' layer to a 'real' layer. While not wishing to preserve this terminology with all its philosophical implications, I would contend that we should endeavor to do something very like this: rather than postulating ontologically divergent strata wherever we are able, we should try wherever possible to discover a unity in apparently divergent strata. (In other words, we should continue to apply Ockham's razor.) Some phenomena are irreducible, but we will only discover which by attempting to reduce them all. It is only when we fail in this that we can argue that we are dealing with something that is genuinely 'other'. Where it is possible to explain one phenomena by reference to another, however contradictory they may superficially appear, we are dealing with a single stratum. Where we cannot do so, where, as is that case with the relation between physical events 'in the world' and representations, we cannot even posit what such a reduction might consist in, we are dealing with different strata. (Castoriadis, 1997c: 364; 1997d: 322-25)

These are only rules of thumb; they are not infallible. What we hold for truth today we may reject tomorrow. In itself this is not a problem. Knowledge changes, truth changes, and the nature and extent of such change cannot be determined in advance. To accept this is just to accept the creative, and therefore indeterminable, nature of knowledge and truth. There *is* a problem, however, to be understood rather than to be overcome. One can only know a stratum as such insofar as one has constructed it as a stratum, insofar, therefore, as one has created this construct. The fact that one has such a construct does not, however, mean that beyond this construct there is a stratum which corresponds to it. There is no formula for determining whether or not this is the case. Nonetheless, the question must be asked and we must endeavor to answer

it each time, even though we are aware that none of our answers will or can ever be definitive. If there are ontological strata each of which constitutes its own ensidic dimension, its own mode of being and of determining/being-determined, then the question of how our constructs, our ensemblizations, correspond to or differ from the intrinsic ensemblization/determination of these is unavoidable.

Castoriadis frames this problem in terms of the relationship between observer and observed. We posit that ‘what is’ “bears with it an ensemblistic-identitary dimension...” (1997e: 307)

Question: Does it bear this dimension with it or do we impose this dimension on it? For the ‘near-perfect’ observer, the question of knowing, in an ultimate sense, what comes from the observer and what comes from the observed is undecidable. (Nothing absolutely chaotic is observable. No absolutely unorganized observer exists. The observation is a not fully decomposable co-product.) (1997e: 307-8)

These statements, while they point us in the direction of an important truth, require some re-interpretation if they are to be made consistent with Castoriadis’s own underlying position. All representational ensemblizations – all categories, all concepts, all theorizations – are impositions. (Castoriadis, 1984a) The ‘observation’ comes from the observer and from the observer alone: it exists only for the observer, and as such it cannot be given even partially by the observed. (Castoriadis, 1997f) It is not a co-product of the observer and the observed, it is a creation of the observer. This creation, insofar as its purpose is to represent, attempts to reach something beyond itself. It can do so only insofar as it is created in such a way that it may be affected by what is ‘other’. It – or the subject who creates it – determines how it might be affected; as Castoriadis points out, if each stratum of Being seems coherent yet incomplete, it is “coherent or incomplete, sufficient or deficient, only relative to the corresponding ‘categorical schema’.” (1984a: 173) We must admit that the questions we ask determine the type of answer we may arrive at. And we must go even further than this. As Castoriadis observes, “no question can arise of itself and have a meaning outside a theoretical framework”. (1984a: 173) In order to determine what shall count as an answer, a theoretical framework must first postulate both ‘what’ is and ‘how’ it is; it must, to some degree, have answered already.

Such answers are what Heidegger refers to as the ‘fore-structure of understanding’, and what Gadamer analyses as ‘prejudices’. (Heidegger, 1962: 188-203; Gadamer, 1975: 235-274) Both the questions and the

answers are ours and can never be other than ours. What makes a question a genuine question is that it does not contain its own answer. The openness of a question depends on its allowing and even seeking out answers that rebound upon the question itself and the prejudices that underlie it and which therefore force us to create a new framework which gives rise to different questions. It is impossible to get beyond this circle; it is also unnecessary.

Castoriadis demonstrates that the possibility of representation, the capacity to impose an order of our own creation, is predicated on the existence of an intrinsic organization of that which we represent. (1984a) The question, then, is not whether this representational ensemblization is ours (it is), nor whether 'what is' contains an ensidic dimension (it does); the question is to what extent any specific representational ensemblization 'reaches', 'corresponds to', obscures or distorts that ensemblization/organization which is intrinsic to the object in question. This question concerns the value of our representational ensemblizations. This value is dependent on the capacity of these ensemblizations to present the non-ensidic – and the differently ensidic – and to do so, as must be the case, by utilizing the capacities of the ensidic logic with which they must necessarily operate; i.e. the logic of *legein*: speaking, naming, counting. No doubt Castoriadis would wish us to add: and by utilizing the imaginary aspect of *legein*, which goes beyond and is not determined by its logical, ensidic dimension.

We can ensemblize 'what is' only 'by fragments'. This limitation of our capacity to ensemblize cannot be explained entirely by reference to the fragmented nature of 'what is', for the fragments we mark out need not coincide with ontological fractures. Even were this not the case, it would be wrong in principle to seek to explain a characteristic of representation by reference to a characteristic of the object represented. Where there are similarities between the two this can only mean that the same or similar characteristics exist independently in both realms, characteristics which may constitute general features of the ensidic, or of determination *per se*. If we know 'by fragments' this is because our ensemblization essentially involves the creation of such fragments. The inevitability of this 'fragmentation' is related to the ultimate indeterminacy and indeterminability of all 'determination', the fact that the ensidic, wherever and whatever it may be, is always, in truth, *quasi-ensidic*.

Ensemblization always holds or applies only *within limits*. Ensemblization itself creates these limits: it is a process of limiting, of establishing limits. The validity or viability of an ensemblization is confined by and within these limits, but without such limitation no ensemblization could exist at all. 'What is' is determinable only within

limits. Insofar as it is not in itself ‘determined’ or ‘determinate’ it exceeds these limits. Insofar as it is essentially indeterminate, it exceeds all and any limits.

Castoriadis discusses this question of limits and limitation in terms of the notion of *modulo*. All determination is limited, conditional, relative; it is determination *with respect to*.... When we ensemblize we endeavor to make determinate what is not in itself fully determined, and we do so, as Castoriadis argues, by ‘marking out’, by separating and defining features that are not in themselves separate and defined. We can do so only because ‘features’ exist, because amidst the flux and indeterminacy there is the constant emergence of separation, of determination, of form; but by the same token, we can do so only by ignoring the inseparability, the indefiniteness of that which we construe as distinct and determined.

We can represent ‘what is’ only by marking out particular ‘features’ which we construct as determined characteristics on the basis of which we distinguish and define an object as such and as ‘this’ object. Which ‘features’ do we choose? Everything may be ensemblizable, argues Castoriadis, but “beyond certain limits or outside of certain domains, everything is so only trivially...” (1987: 343) How are we to determine what is trivial and what is not? As Castoriadis suggests, and as the examples he offers show, this “concerns the object one is considering as well as what one wishes to do with it.” (1987: 343) To weigh the statues in the Louvre is not trivial when viewed from the perspective of the necessity of moving them; it is trivial, however, when viewed from an aesthetic or cultural perspective. One cannot determine either the artistic merit or the meaning of a statue by its weight. Statues *can* be weighed, however – their being as artworks does not eliminate their being as physical objects possessing mass. Michelangelo’s ‘David’, for example, is a hunk of marble. It is not just a hunk of marble, of course. But why ‘of course’? Whether Michelangelo’s ‘David’ is just a hunk of marble or a statue will depend on who is making such a judgement and why. The being of the object as object, both what it is and also whether it is – i.e. as a distinct and separate object – will depend on the nature of the observer and his/her aims. One can certainly offer myriad criteria for distinguishing a statue from other hunks of marble, and these criteria concern characteristics which are ‘discoverable’ in the object, but they are not discoverable in the absence of these criteria, and according to other criteria they may be not just irrelevant but imperceptible. What is more, their ‘discovery’ is inevitably also their creation as determinate characteristics, so that in the absence of the appropriate criteria they simply cannot be said to exist. If and insofar as we decide that this hunk of marble is a statue, we must admit that the type of ensemblization to

which we would subject it as a hunk of marble is no longer appropriate. Statues and stones are different types of objects: their modes of being are 'other'. However, their existence as 'objects' cannot be separated from 'what one wants to do with them'. It is the latter that first determines not only which object is before us but whether there is an object at all.

Castoriadis is well aware of this quandary.

The creation of thought renders thinkable what was not previously thinkable, or not in that way. It brings into being: brings into being as thinkable *that which* ...What? That which, without it, would not be thinkable? Or that which, without it, would not be? Each of these paths leads back into the other. (1984b: xxvii)

Here once more we encounter the figure of the circle, which appears again and again in Castoriadis's work. Castoriadis himself, as we know, refers to this circle as the circle of creation. Though Castoriadis would be unlikely to concede this, this same circle is what, following Heidegger and Gadamer, we have come to know as the hermeneutical circle. When faced with this circle, what we must understand is what Castoriadis, Heidegger and Gadamer each in his own way reveals: that this circle is not a prison, that it is instead that which makes knowledge possible. To 'reach' what is beyond – which is also to create what is not (not yet) – is not to escape the circle, it is to transform it, to create a new circle. The 'horizon' which limits our vision is also what enables us to see, since that which is unlimited/indeterminate is invisible. But as these limits are creations, and our creations, they are not essentially or inevitably 'closed'. We can alter them, transform them, replace them. The horizon moves with us; we move the horizon. (Gadamer, 1975: 271) Wherever we are, there is a horizon, but it is not the same horizon everywhere.

This circularity may be universal, but this does not mean that all circles are the same. A deliberate (that is to say, autonomous) transformation of our understanding is possible only through a particular kind of circle, one with certain specifiable characteristics. Recognizing the elements of our understanding – the concepts, axioms, theories, etc. – as 'prejudices', as judgements, affects the character of these elements. A concept that is questionable because it is recognized as a creation and a superimposition, differs from one the truth of which is beyond question because it is regarded as 'natural' – in the sense that it in one way or another 'emanates' from the 'object' – or 'received' – i.e. is attributed to a source with a privileged access to truth.

When we ensemblize we create representational ‘objects’. What is true of these objects is true, but the conditions of this truth also creates these objects. What is the relationship between these objects and ‘what is’? ‘What is’ is ‘provisionally’ the object we create. Amongst an indeterminate multiplicity of determinations, ‘what is’ is ‘within limits’ and ‘with respect to’, also this. To say that ‘what is’ is this object does not and cannot mean what it would mean if ‘being’ were construed as ‘determinacy’; but this, of course, is the issue.

Castoriadis’s assertions about mathematical objects need to be re-examined in the light of the preceding reflections. Castoriadis claims that we discover the mode of being of the magma everywhere “save in mathematical constructions separated from their foundations”. (1997a: 364) It would seem, then, that for Castoriadis such mathematical objects are true ensembles. However, as he concedes, this is true only of mathematical constructions separated from their foundations. The problem is that mathematical constructions are not separate from their foundations and cannot be separated from them. A mathematical construction separated from its foundations is an object separated from that on the basis of which it exists. A mathematical construction may be regarded as a true ensemble only as long as we assume without question the validity of the rules and principles according to which it is constructed. But the same may be said of any ensemblization, even the most patently tendentious. If there is a difference – and undoubtedly there is – between mathematical constructions and other ensemblizations, this cannot be a difference between ‘genuine’ and ‘non-genuine’ ensembles.

Mathematical objects are *presentations* – they are ‘imaginary’ in the sense that they are spontaneous creations of the radical imagination or radical imaginary which are not bound to the ‘real’ world via being submitted to a representing function. These presentations may or may not be put to use in representation. Representations are also ‘imaginary’ in the sense that they are creations, but inasmuch as they are submitted to the task of representing something beyond themselves, they are no longer ‘imaginary’ in this more limited sense. To reject the validity of the rules and principles according to which a mathematical object is constructed is to destroy the object in question; to reject the validity of the assumptions underlying a representational ensemblization destroys the representation, but this still leaves that which was to be represented. The fact that this ‘X’ does not merely disappear indicates not that it is possible to represent it otherwise but that it is already also represented in another manner, even if this be merely at the level of ‘shock’. In this way, as Castoriadis puts it, the object exceeds the manner in which it was thought – though it does

not and obviously cannot, for us, exceed any thought/perception (any representation) whatsoever. The imaginary (mathematical) object, on the other hand, is inseparable from the thought/imagining that brings it into being. There is a difference between that which, outside our thought/imagining would not be thinkable and that which, outside our thought/imagining, would not be. It is the difference between that which exists only by virtue of the self's creative activity and that which also exists 'in itself'; between that which the self makes and that which the self finds. The fact that the self can only ever 'find' something 'other' by making something of its own does not destroy this distinction.

Mathematical constructions, like all other ensembles/ensemblizations, are determined and determinable only 'within limits', and only 'with respect to'. If they seem to be ensemblizable/determinable to an exhaustive degree, as Castoriadis sometimes suggests they are (1997e: 298), this is only because and insofar as these limits are respected. This restriction is achieved more successfully and completely in the case of mathematics than it is elsewhere.

When we speak of determination and determinacy we must always be aware that these characteristics can never be divorced from the *modulo* – the 'with respect to' – in relation to which the form in question is perceived and thought and in relation to which the form is. The significance of the 'with respect to' is not confined to representation, it is central to being per se. The principles according to which we represent 'what is' are the laws according to which representations are formed; they are the laws given by the self to the self as the laws of its own self-formation. The mode and scope of operation of each of these laws is governed and limited by the laws own inherent 'with respect to'. In the same way, the laws of the non-self are limited. Within the limits within which these laws operate and which the operation of these laws establish, that which is formed according to these laws is determined sufficiently for it to effectively be; i.e. for it to affect and to be affected, in the manner proper to it. Outside these limits, these same forms are quite simply irrelevant. When we forget this, or if we reject such a notion altogether, questions about determinacy soon lead to unresolvable aporias. What degree of determinacy is there in the structure and organization of a living being? Sufficient (under certain highly limited conditions) for it to be: to be what it is and as it is.

There is a difference, of course, between the inherent 'with respect to' governing determination in the realm of the non-self and the 'with respect to' as it operates in the realm of the for-itself. In the latter, the 'with respect to' must be given by the self to itself as part of its self-

creation; it is related to a goal or set of goals, the most fundamental of which is the continuation of the self's own mode of being. In this context, the 'with respect to' is purposive. This purposiveness must not be confused with consciousness, let alone deliberateness; rather it is what precedes these and makes each possible.

In the passage from the living being to the human, the nature of self-determination alters. One would be tempted to describe this alteration as a 'forgetting', except that what is supposedly forgotten was not known before and could not become known except via such a 'forgetting'. What is 'forgotten', what is 'cast aside', is the 'with respect to' of determination, its intrinsic limitation and limitedness. The appearance of ensemblization qua ensidic logic-ontology in the fundamental instituting institutions of the social-historical represents an absolutization of determination, an expansion beyond all limits of the drive towards determination that is essential to creation. If we encounter in the social-historical 'objects' which seem closer to true ensembles than anything we encounter elsewhere, this is because here alone forms are produced through the operations of a logic which assumes and demands full and complete determinacy. Elsewhere there exists only the ensidic qua determination. With the social-historical there emerges for the first time the ensidic qua determinacy. It emerges not as an achievement – i.e. not as the production of true ensembles – but as a principle, an aim, a norm.

This shrugging off of the limits of determination is intimately related to that indeterminacy characteristic of self-creation in the human domain. If indeterminacy entails the transcendence/destruction of limits, amongst these limits are the limits placed upon determination itself. With the greatest indeterminacy the scope for determination becomes greatest.

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