

Ontological Anarché Beyond Arché & Anarché

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ABSTRACT

I analyze the contemporary notion of a world without preordained principle, ground, or substance and argue that this inversion of the tradition of metaphysical thinking remains parasitic on metaphysics. I show that ontological anarché is firmly oriented around the notion of arché, which entails a process of denial and asceticism by its proponents. In moving beyond the tragic opposition of arché and anarché, I suggest we turn to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy helps to undermine the traditional opposition of *something* and *nothing*, arché and anarché, by demonstrating the co-originality of the two *together* in being-*with*. I conclude that the proper notion of the modern human community is precisely that its ground or arché is not the ground, principle, or, substance of the pre-modern era but rather *spirit* or *relationality*: the *com-* of community.

KEYWORDS

ground, principle, substance, post-foundationalism, democracy, community

This essay examines an ambivalence that lies at the heart of the notion of *ontological anarché*. This ambivalence arises from the conflict between an active and actual (i.e., positive) political projects espoused in much anarchist thinking and the negative *denotation* that accompanies the word anarchy. Anarchy, as is well known, proceeds from the confluence of the privative affix *an* and the Greek root *arché*, which can be translated variously as rule, ground, principle, or foundation. Placed together, an-archy signifies the absence of a preordained order through which to guide action. In the past, anarchy merely represented one political regime among many; it could be compared and contrasted

with the great and ubiquitous *arché* mon-archy: the rule of one. However, in recent times anarchy has gained a deeper metaphysical or ontological status thanks to the decline of metaphysics ushered in by Nietzsche and Heidegger and proceeding into our *post-modern* present.

In this vein, anarchy signifies not simply a *style* of politics but the very predicament (or scandal) of politics itself. Politics, and political regimes, exist precisely because of the absence of *arché* that defines our ontological existence. My interest in this topic lies specifically within the context of the metaphysical or ontological embrace of a world without foundation (without *arché*) by political philosophers on the French Left (Castoriadis, Lefort, Mannoni, Abensour, Rancière, etc.). This article aims to demonstrate that what has been called “post-foundational” thinking (Marchart, 2009), is essentially *ontological anarché*, and that the latter, despite its pretensions, maintains hidden commitments to the onto-theological project of foundational or principled (*archic*) thought. As such, *post-foundational* thought, or *ontological anarché*, manifests itself as essentially the mirror-image of that which it seeks to oppose. Following my demonstration of this tragic reversal, I will conclude with a brief discussion of the work of another contemporary Leftist political philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, who aims to reposition ontological anarché in such a way as to move it beyond the *arché/anarché* divide (entangled as it is with other modern dichotomies like dogmatism/skepticism) in order to rethink human communities as the product of a paradoxically *principled anarchy*.

The burgeoning fascination with ontological anarché can be traced to the 20th century. With the collapse of the totalizing meta-narrative of communism, coupled with the decay of capitalist liberal-democratic multiculturalism, the West witnessed a revival of a politics of *radical democracy*. The metaphysical makeup that sustains much of the new philosophy of radical democracy, whether in the formative thought of Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, or their successors Miguel Abensour and Jacques Rancière, is the thought of a *cosmos* without order, an ontology that is fundamentally *anarchic*. As Castoriadis put it, the enterprise of modernity, almost universally attributed to René Descartes, was shackled to a delusion that concealed the ontological fact that “there is not and cannot be a rigorous or ultimate foundation of anything” (1995: 87). Sharing in this sentiment, the embrace of anarché—at least at the metaphysical level—has reached new heights among contemporary French intellectuals.

One can immediately sense the attractiveness—the temptation—that ontological anarché presents the weary and disappointed theorist. Having been successfully strung along for millennia with ever-changing regimes of order—God, Reason, History—the notion that all of these are merely varying types of *illusion* seems quite revelatory, even emancipating. Not only may we then reject the entire history of Truth as metaphysical superstition, we may finally cease looking for order altogether. Cosmos is, in actual fact, chaos. Quite similarly, truth is *doxa* (opinion) and *doxa* is power. This is the new *post-modern* formula that undergirds ontological anarché.

Yet the turn toward an ontological anarchism as an escape from the legacy of 20th century totalizing thought is fraught with difficulties. Castoriadis, for one, accepts anarchism as a sort of *tabula rasa* that lies beyond good and evil: if there is no foundational arché then all action is equally arbitrary (1995: 106, 161). According to him, the only possible purveyor of a criterion can be found in those who constitute a given social-historical milieu: a group he calls the *demos* (1995: 105–106, 109). Yet, the actions of the *demos* themselves are essentially beyond judgment (save by a future *demos*) and as such Castoriadis can offer no hard and fast ethical rules. The only ethical principle of his an-archic political philosophy is the mandate of disclosing the *demos* as the constituent members of any and all human creation: whether in the form of politics, economics, or jurisprudence.

Castoriadis' brand of radical democracy, grounded on the abyss of an ontological anarchism, has become popular in contemporary discourse. It functions as a critic of representative and totalizing systems which serve to conceal how the whole of society is responsible for creating and legitimating the vast matrix of socio-historical artifacts. His intellectual colleague, Claude Lefort, approached the same problem from a different angle, one undoubtedly influenced by his own mentor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968: 211). Lefort (2000) proposes “savage democracy” (see Moyn, 2005: xx) which his student, Miguel Abensour, links directly with anarchy in an essay published alongside the English translation of the latter's *Democracy Against the State*; “savage democracy,” according to Abensour, resists and rejects all notion of principle which would violate the essential purity of its groundlessness (2011: 123–124).

This abrupt passage from rigid order to absolute and essential disorder, however, belies a concern that is at least as old as the very project of post-foundationalism or ontological anarchy. This

concern is expressed in “Letter on Humanism” by Martin Heidegger in his critique of the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, where he posits the *tragic* problem at the heart of the matter, namely that “the *reversal* of a metaphysical statement *remains a metaphysical statement*” (1993: 232). In Heidegger’s mind, Sartre’s existential humanism was merely replacing belief in God with an equally opaque belief in “man” (1993: 226). In the eyes of Christopher Watkin, Sartre was not dethroning religion but imitating it (2011: 2). Yet, imitation, or perhaps better, *substitution*, is not the only form of upholding an allegiance to *archic* thought. One can also forgo the chain of substituting one metaphysical principle for another by renouncing metaphysics itself, and in so doing, maintain a connection to *archic* thought by more subversive and subconscious means. Watkin names this process “residual atheism” (2011: 6)—a concept which we may easily convert to *residual anarchism*—and its duplicitous nature is most clearly shown by the paradoxical notion of *negative theology*.

The concept of *negative theology* arises from the philosophy of religion that, in some ways, is a counterpart of modern anarchist thought. As Hegel and others make clear, what lies at the heart of the modern experience of Christianity is *the death of God* (Hegel, 2006: 468). As such, Christianity is essentially “a religion for departing from religion” (Gauchet, 1997: 4). Yet, this departure which Sartre and others have interpreted as a rejection of the *archic* onto-theological *cosmos* takes the form of trading the notion of a *present* God for an *absent* one. This switch (from presence to absence) is far less radical than it first seems: in both cases, thought is still firmly entrenched on the original subject (e.g. God, truth, arché). As Henri Bergson reminded us a century ago,

a non-existent can only consist, therefore, in *adding* something to the idea of this object: we add to it, in fact, the idea of an *exclusion* of this particular object by actual reality in general. To think the object A as non-existent is first to think the object and consequently to think it existent; it is then to think that another reality, with which it is incompatible, supplants it. (2005: 310)

Bergson shows us that the grammar of non-existence involves maintaining the conception of the very object whose existence is to be denied. In the case of ontological anarché, despite the explicit denial of the premise (arché), anarché implicitly retains an orientation around ground, foundation, or principle (arché). In

the words of Nietzsche, the followers of an ontological anarchism have merely divested themselves from the “church”—the outward appearance of archic thought—but have yet to abandon the “poison” (2006: bk. 1, §9)—the hidden nectar or kernel of archeism that runs through the veins of ontological anarché.

The source of the problem lies in the terms of the controversy itself. Ontological anarchism, far from being a radical alternative to the modern paradigm, is very much rooted in the same dichotomous structure as its predecessors. Indeed, one can trace its lineage from the high modernism of figures like Max Weber—who famously posited the fact/value distinction—to the post-metaphysical thinkers who espouse an anarchic ontology. The modernist gulf separating what-is (ontology/metaphysics) from what-ought (ethics/morality), which first destabilized the latter realm in the name of pure scientific rationality (positivism), later expanded to envelope that which it had originally safeguarded. How could one seek objective scientific truth without recognizing the implicit valuation, passion, or drive that lies behind such a pursuit? The end result of this post-modern destabilization is not merely a political anarchism that takes the form of collective legislating on values or *nomos* (laws) that exist within the framework of an ordered and regimented natural world (a *cosmos*). Instead, it is the dawn of a thoroughly ontological anarchism which finds itself beyond the reach of any stabilizing factor (a *chaos*).

Pierre Manent, another figure of the post-foundational group, explains that the chaotic abyss that late modernism has opened should be neither shunned nor bridged. Rather, he tells us that it is our profound and heroic task to stand face-to-face with this nothingness, this nihilism which is “not only our curse but also our duty” (Manent, 2000). Politically, it means to embrace the arbitrary legislation of Castoriadis’ *demos* and the savage democracy of Lefort. The ancient ethos of courage, then, returns as the cardinal political virtue, and it signifies the ability to stare unflinchingly into the abyss. Yet, was it not also Nietzsche who warned us of the dangers inherent in such an act (2001: pt. 4, #146)? In our case, the danger results from a tragic reversal that weaves together subject and object, infusing nihilism into the heart of the courageous hero.

The drama of the tragic reversal, captured by Aristotle as the heart of the ancient plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (1984: ln. 1452a22–24), returns with the metaphysical substitution of arché with anarché. This process of reversal completes the teleology of modernism. The abyss resulting from the de-structuring

of values and facts leads not to yet another set of values—for that would be contradictory—but rather to the celebration of the abyss as our tragic destiny, as we witnessed with Manent. In this regard, ontological anarchism is predisposed to take the form of a negative theology that binds itself to the withdrawal of the Absolute/archic and constitutes itself in mourning for this powerful absence. Indeed, by situating itself precisely on the negative ‘an’ of an-archism, the legatees of modernism have constructed for themselves an essentially reactive metaphysics that is parasitic on the history of archic ontology.

In place of the variety of principles that have substituted and signified presence—the core of archic thought—ontological anarchism pivots around absence. There, absence becomes every bit as much of a foundation (an arché) as the varied incarnations of presence ever were. In Sartre, the abandonment of humans by God leads to a brand of Promethean humanism where the role of God is downloaded to us mortals (2004: 352). Yet, as Heidegger points out, this exchange or reversal, imports the metaphysics of the former into the latter. Humanism becomes pregnant with unthought assumptions which provide the hidden ground of Sartre’s onto-political project (1993: 226, 232).

Similarly, the central place of human self-determination or autonomy in the thought of the post-foundationalists belies a metaphysics of production and valuation. Rather than radically revaluing value—as Nietzsche commends us—the thought of human self-production or auto-poiēsis carries out the modern capitalist dream of the self-made man. However, by destabilizing the values that originally complemented modernism, by disclosing them as essentially empty and vain, humanity finds itself driven further and further into nihilism.

We are tasked, according to the thinkers of radical democracy with building a world, with owning the values we instill, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that all values are equally valueless. As such, the world envisioned by ontological anarché, captivated as it is by the value-producing faculty of the imagination and the social imaginary, resembles the dystopian limbo featured in Christopher Nolan’s 2010 film, *Inception*. There, the imaginary world created by Mal and Cobb crumbles and vanishes away like castles made of sand. Moreover, this reality leads the deranged wife of the protagonist, Mal, who is haunted by the presentiment that her world is ultimately false (or arbitrary), to commit suicide in order to wake to the truth.

Perhaps contemporary post-foundational philosophers would

object that such an action bespeaks a lack of courage to come to terms with the radical contingency, anarchy, or falsity that has become the substance of the post-modern world. Yet, as long as these terms (contingency, anarchy, falsity) exist as a couple with their opposites (necessity, arché, truth), through which they are defined, the presence of one will entail a longing for the absent other. Following Bergson, we can affirm that “the act by which we declare an object unreal therefore posits the existence of the real in general” (2005: 310). If we return, briefly, to *Inception*, we can note that prior to Mal’s anxiety over the valuelessness or falsity of the world, she embraced her imaginary world only by forgetting or suppressing the fact of its falsity. As such, the dreamworld exists for Mal either as real and therefore archic or as false and therefore as a remnant or residue (to borrow from Watkin) of the real. In either case, the dreamworld is entangled with ontological arché. In this way, *Inception* depicts both trajectories that are nascent within our (post)modern epistemology. The embrace of ontological anarché requires either a concealing, as Heidegger saw in Sartrean humanism, or an increasingly maddening flight from the clutches of the abyss egged on by an “unquenchable craving for the Absolute” (Lánczi, 2010: 95).

Ultimately, both embracing and fleeing an anarchic world is essentially tragic. Furthermore, the notion that one can courageously stand midway between these two tragic poles, occupying the magical midpoint that Aristotle called *sophrosyne* (moderation), is to commit the very act of *hybris* (hubris) that ancient tragedy preys upon. One can take, for example, Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* where the eponymous tragic hero attempts to navigate between his duty to express humility before the gods and his wife’s demand, on behalf of the polis, for his exaltation following the Greek victory in the Trojan War. Needless to say, this juncture leads to his tragic demise.

Despite the grim dilemma that ontological anarché opens before us, it still compels our attention simply because we can no longer fool ourselves into believing a return to a pre-modern hierarchical model of being (God, human, animals) or politics (the ancient cycle of monarchy, aristocracy, democracy) is a solution to our current predicament. There is no way to re-enchant a disenchanted world. Indeed, in those moments where such recourse has managed to seduce a population (e.g., in the totalitarian movements of the early 20th century), the cure has proven far worse than the original disease.

If regression is out of the question, and the brute acceptance

of anarchic or savage being and its political counterpart, savage democracy (Lefort/Abensour), contains two perilous and equally tragic alternatives, it appears that modernity leaves us with an insoluble problem. It is at this point where the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy commends itself. Nancy (2010) speaks of a paradoxically “principled anarchy” (p. 66)—or archic-anarchy that overcomes the dichotomic trap established by our modern bipolar condition. Rather than seeking comfort in the oppressive regimes fortified by tradition and the transcendent idols called God, Reason, the Good, etc., or risking the savage democracy of a world without principles or meaning, Nancy suggests overcoming the very choice itself. Such a choice, he argues, misapprehends the fundamental nature of human existence as being-with: a condition which is neither singular nor plural (Nancy, 2000: pp. 7, 42).

By understanding ontological anarché as having eclipsed the central dichotomies of modernity—operating neither as anarchic or archic nor through an originary founding of society on either the individual subject (as king) or the collective subject (as demos)—Nancy opens a new way of understanding anarchism that is not constrained by the libertarian / communitarian divide. Indeed, this principled anarchy or archic-anarchism may prove to be the essential turning point in re-grounding political sovereignty in a world that remains hesitant at leaping head-first into the abyss of the savage democracy constituted by ontological anarché, but that must come to grips with the failure of utopian communism and our eroding liberal-democracies.

According to Nancy, we must be wary of dodging the commitments of modernism by simply choosing otherwise. Watkin, we might recall, notes that such a maneuver employs a form of asceticism or self-denial that defines itself in juxtaposition to that which it decries. Asceticism, no more than the blatant substitution of one arché for another, a strategy he calls parasitism, surpasses the trap of modernity (2011: 11). Nancy’s ontological solution avoids both parasitism and asceticism and yet reclaims the function of (archic) foundation. Following a Hegelian motif, Nancy asserts that ontology properly understood is not an archic substance but spirit. Arché is thus restored but not as a thing—a foundation, ground, or principle—but rather as relation. In *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, Nancy plays with the notion of the anarchic abyss as nothing, which he reads as a special type of thing that is not: “it is that very particular thing that nothing [rien] is” (2007: 102).

Similarly in *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy argues that

what he is speaking about

is a groundless ‘ground’ less in the sense that it opens up the gaping chasm of an abyss than that it is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities: *Ungrund* rather than *Abgrund*, but no less vertiginous. (1991: 27)

Here the distinction between the German *un* and *ab* with the root *grund* [ground] goes to the heart of our problematic regarding ontological anarché. Nancy’s distinction operates on the difference between the strictly negative *ab* of *Abgrund*—denoting absence—and the less antagonistic *un* of *Ungrund*, which denotes instead dissimilarity. In this way, Nancy means to suggest a sublation of the dichotomy of ground and abyss that confounds modern (and post-modern) metaphysics.

What makes *Ungrund* distinct from *Abgrund* is the fact of relation. Nancy circumvents the dichotomous logic of presence and absence by making the relation he calls being-with central to ontology. The with of being-with, or, alternatively, the com of community, speaks neither of a primordial togetherness (a *demos* or society or collective) nor of an *ex post facto* association of disparate and atomized individuals (as envisioned by liberal-democratic philosophers in the tradition of the social contract). Nancy achieves this by realizing that the abyss that underlies all attempts at founding an ontological or political order is essentially ambivalent. As I have tried to demonstrate, the contemporary interpretation of this abyss does not account for this ambivalence and reads the concept strictly as nothingness, lack, disorder, or chaos: the negation of the cosmological arché. This pure negativity opens the door to nihilism, as Pierre Manent is well aware. However, rather than attempt to moderate or barter with nothingness, as Manent suggests, Nancy finds in the abyss itself an essentially positive meaning. It is this insight into nothingness that enables Nancy to determine that nothing is identical to the common—an object that is incomparable to *demos*, society or collective. Rather, the common is the spacing which is always between singular beings, relating them and hence implicating singularity alongside plurality.

On account of its status as space, the common is clearly nothing: a lacuna, the void. However, it is that because it is always already implicated in the bodies of the singularities themselves. There is no spacing outside of singularities nor any singularities

outside of spacing. For this reason, it is perhaps more productive to speak of Nancy's no-thing as the with of being-with or the 'com' of com-munity. In this manner, we are disabused of the pretence of an originary lacuna that necessitates a contingent or arbitrary society. In its place, we see the co-originality of no-thing and some-thing—forever upending the philosophical question as to why there is something rather than nothing. As such, ontological anarché loses its meaning as a tabula rasa from which all artifice is equally arbitrary, and instead gains a positive ethical imperative: relationality. Relationality, of course, is hardly the archic telos espoused by the metanarratives of old, but neither is it nothing. Instead, it is the trace and measure both of the democracy we have and the democracy-to-come.

It is the contention of this article that the notion of ontological anarché acts as a siren song to call us back to the tyrannical logic of arché through the pretence that an inversion of this logic will lead to a fundamentally different outcome. At the same time, however, ontological anarché can allow for exploring paths beyond the contradiction created by the dichotomies of modern logic. In undertaking this alternate path, beyond the polarity of arché and anarché, we have the chance of salvaging value from the nihilism of our postmodern condition. To realize the value of being-with, of com-munity, as the essential creator of all sense and signification, is to move from an abstract and vapid ontology of nihilistic value-production to an ethics and politics of world—or community—creation. It is the latter which strikes me as the proper course for contemporary ontological and political anarchism.

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