

**The Heretical Conception  
of the European Legacy in the Late  
Essays of Jan Patočka**

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# The Heretical Conception of the European Legacy

## in the Late Essays of Jan Patočka

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In this short piece I am not undertaking to give a full discussion of the whole of Patočka's 'heretical' work. I wish only make clear its most essential core. What, in Patočka's view, made Europe *Europe* and what is Europe's legacy to the world after what Patočka describes as its fall, completed by the two world wars? What should Europe look to conserve if—as seems likely—it would like to once again play a respected role in world events? Is there something which the globalised world should take over from old Europe, or something which it should eschew, if it does not wish history to end and utter decadence to ensue?

### *The emergence of the problematic character of the human condition*

In Patočka's view, history begins with a shaking, or a shock. The so-called pre-historical period saw the gradual collapse of the closedness of the old world in myth where a person lives in the safety of an 'pregiven meaning', that is in a meaning granted and 'modest but reliable' (HE 12)<sup>1</sup>, accepted by a person without question. Such a world, Patočka writes, 'is meaningful, that is, intelligible, because there are therein powers, the demonic, the gods that

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout "HE" refers to Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, translated by Erazim Kohák, Open Court, Chicago, 1996

stand over humans, ruling over them and deciding their destiny' (HE 12). It is 'the world prior to the discovery of its problematic character... in which concealment is not experienced as such' (HE 12). Although there is much of great mystery in it, there is no room for question: for '.... questions assume a possible liberation, a distance from what we are and the situation in which we find ourselves...' (CW 28a)<sup>2</sup>. History begins in Patočka's view, where that 'distance' is established, where that 'liberation' takes place, and where man starts to explicitly pose questions which were unnecessary in myth. To these questions, new and never before posed, there are however no ready answers. 'The problematic character not of this or that but of the whole as such, as well as of the life that is rigorously integrated into it' (HE 25) emerges. The discovery of this new, all-inclusive problematicity is seen by Patočka as a shock, which fundamentally changes the way of life which people up until that time lived, changing their world and man himself. It is only these new events that are historical in Patočka's view.

In the world prior to the beginning of history, "meaning appeared and determined itself before every question." (CW 28a) It was, from time immemorial, a piece with the tradition of myth-telling and ensured that man had a modest, more or less unfree, status as a none too important component of the sublime universal whole, concerned most of all with his own survival and sustenance. In contrast to the everyday "toiling for a full stomach" there was for mythical man only the demonic ecstasy of "private and public orgiastic moments, sexuality and cult " (HE 103).

One of the pieces of evidence of the start of change, which led ultimately to a situation in which free man found himself in the open world,

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<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout "CW" refers to the third volume of Jan Patočka's Collected Works published in Czech under the title *Sebrané Spisy: Péče o duši, III, OIKOYMENH*, Praha, 2002. These translations are my own (J.H.)

face to face with the problematic world as a whole, is to be seen, according to Patočka, in the myth about Gilgamesh. In this tale the hero is confronted with the loss of meaning, with the weakness of human physicality and with human mortality, but, in the face of this problematicity into which the situation has brought him, according to Patočka, he turns away and takes up construction of the town fortifications, within which life devoted to mere sustenance might continue uninterrupted: “the possibility of a shaking presses in on him but is rejected” (HE 62).

In contrast to this, Homer’s Achilles consciously chooses a short, but glorious life. In Greek myth the hero is increasingly put into a position of choice in which various gods place mutually irreconcilable demands on him. Their contradiction cannot be resolved in the given situation, and the result is tragic. A hero worthy of the name does, however, choose a possibility which in some way transcends the level of mere sustenance, or of the mere preservation of life. In Heraclitus’ still partly mythical conception, the hero performs actions which bring him eternal glory among the mortal, something more than mere life (HE 136, 42).

### *The origin of the responsible individual*

Epic and dramatic poetry (HE 102) does not now just recount myth, but starts to treat of the status of man in the world. It shows how man, with the help of the gods themselves, begins to emerge from his immediate state and to look upon himself and the world from above, as it were, to look upon his immediate state as a situation. Instead of direct participation in a ritual orgy he becomes capable of looking at the sacred ceremony from without, as a spectator, and of experiencing the situation presented within (HE 102), something which leads to the beginning of theatre. He can in this be even represented by emissaries who go to watch the olympic games, for example,

in a far off sacred region on his behalf. (This is the origin of the word *theoria*, which referred to such a mission with the task of observing a sacred ceremony and then reporting back on it. Still, today, the word refers to a detachment, released from a particular engagement with things, that is an abstract observance of principles and of the way things, and reflection on them, are subject to laws.) This “inner mastering of the sacred through its interiorisation” (HE 102) is one of the moments on the way to the emergence of the independent “self”, of the individual being which withstands a shocking confrontation with its status as a mortal being in the midst of a limitless abyss.

Only when treated as such, does a situation become *situation*. While we understand and immediately act in an unproblematic way, we cannot speak of situations strictly understood. Situation arises only where there is a question. A question can only be posed where there is speech. There is speech where one is not alone. In a situation we are always—whether immediately or mediately—with others, who along with us share and create that situation. Other people share and create it, together with the actual state of things—perhaps still with various deities—by urging a person to behave somehow in a given situation, to act. The participators in a situation are many and their demands various. The question posed to a person is: what should you do, how should you behave in the given situation?

A question requires an answer. Linked to the discovery of a situation as situation, that is with the treatment of a situation as a question, is the emergence of responsibility. As soon as we are able to adopt a thematic distance, as soon as we pose a question in this way, we become responsible in that we are conscious not only of the question but also that this question posed by the situation does not have an unambiguous answer, despite our wanting it to. To adopt this distance means to acquit oneself in action before

others and before oneself, that is, to be capable of securing their agreement with one's action and at the same time to explicitly accept the action oneself, thus accounted for. In the process of accountability we therefore accept and reject our actions and thereby we create and maintain our own specific individuality. At the same time we answer the question whether that which we did was indeed right.

I say 'was' quite consciously. Often we act, and must act, immediately, that is earlier and faster than we are able to formulate the relevant question and find an answer. The answer, one might say, is the acting itself: it is our action rather than the result of our considerations. That does not mean, however, that we have escaped the question. On the contrary: the action performed in a given situation is an answer to that situation, which is itself implicitly a question demanding judgement. The responsible one is the one who is willing and able to render an account of his actions, pass judgement on them and to relate the action to the problematicity by which he answered the question of the situation. If the action in a given situation is the correct answer, it is 'in order' and the whole episode generally passes without our noticing it, it does not draw my—or anyone else's—attention: rather it opens up one's view to what is up and coming.

We talk about responsibility above all—almost exclusively in fact—in the opposite case in which it turns out that the answer which we gave by our action is in some way unsatisfactory. The one who is responsible when he rejects his own action, but is unable to take it back, once again stands before the question of how to act in order to resolve the unsatisfactory situation which arose primarily because he was not able to give a satisfactory answer by his action in the previous situation. So the one who is responsible is the one who adopts a distance towards his immediacy and becomes an individual who, along with others acts in the situation, understands the connectedness of

the situation, of the asking and doing, and by his replies and actions he keeps to a path leading to ever further situations and to ever further questions.

*Patočka's existentialist understanding of responsibility*

Patočka understands responsibility in a quite clearly Heideggerian way as an "achievement", in which a person "leads" his "true" "own being", "identifies with its burden" (HE 98). The opposite of the life of the responsible is for him an "alienated" life, which "lightens" its burden. It is "avoidance, escape, a deviation into inauthenticity" which causes us "to be manifest to ourselves as other than we are" (HE 97). "True, authentic being consists in our ability to let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying its own being and its own nature to it" (HE 98).

Patočka's formulations concerning responsibility seem to go beyond what had hitherto been put forward and conceptually developed. Responsibility seems to mean more for him than the discovery of the problematicity and situatedness which force the responsible to pose *the question of the rightness* of his behaviour and in certain cases to find that his behaviour was not right. Patočka's formulations now enable one to understand the responsibility alone as already the *right response*. To be responsible is now, in his view, itself "the right way of being", even though that means only "to be able" to go the right way, that it means only the possibility of "not corrupting", "not denying" and "leaving everything as it is". The tendency to such an understanding, however, is only hinted at by Patočka. He does not insist on it. On the contrary: as soon as this tendency begins to assert itself too strongly he explicitly rejects it. The tendency is not, however, isolated in his text. The tendency not to distinguish between the seeing of the problem and the solving of the problem—the tendency to substitute the capacity to ask questions for the capacity to respond to them—

is the inner nerve of his whole philosophical attitude. It is our view that it is just this tendency that renders Patočka's philosophy of history so difficult to grasp and therefore we will consciously trace it further.

*The origin of the polis as a rising out of decadence*

The existentialist understanding of responsibility allows Patočka to treat the beginning of history "as a rising above decadence, as the realization that life hitherto had been a life in decadence" (HE 102), and that is the case both when one was concerned with one's needs for survival and also when, in ecstasy, one has succumbed to the orgiastic ritual, simply because it was life in immediacy which was not aware of its own problematicity. "The Greek *polis*, *epos*, tragedy, and philosophy are different aspects of the same thrust which represents a rising above decadence" (HE 103).

Let us reflect, then, on what, in Patočka's view, the Greek *polis* introduces—what the "rising" of political life consists in. The question which a situation confronts us with is often one concerning life and death. While in the mythical world, "warriors prior to the emergence of political life find their support in a meaning woven into the immediacy of life, fighting for their home, family, for the continuum of life to which they belong—in them they have their support and goal" (HE 39), and thus they might unproblematically and immediately lay down their lives in battle, or slay their enemies, the responsible must "justify and ground" (HE 38) everything which had been experienced passively to that time, because he begins to be aware that now "life does not stand on the firm ground of generative continuity, it is not backed by the dark earth, but only by darkness, that is, it is ever *confronted* by its finitude and the permanent precariousness of life" (HE 38-39). Now the warrior can only lay down his own life and take the life of another in cases where he can offer an account for doing so: that is, when he can respond to



the question whether it is right to do so. And he can respond to the question positively only when what is at stake is more than life, when what is at stake is to raise life above the level of mere vegetative existence, above life for life's sake. This "more" is however free life, exactly that kind of life which lives in problematicity enabling us to catch sight of the "more". And the maintenance of this life is worth dying or killing for—it even becomes a duty. The free person cannot be responsible for life beneath the level of the free life—such a life has no sense for him.

The aim of the free life is, then, free life itself, the meaning of which is the maintenance of its freedom. It comes to this most of all in the battle for life and death against others who wish to deprive the free of their freedom. From this battle, which is ultimately a struggle over how to deal with the problematicity which the free person must face, arises the "spirit of the *polis*", which is "a spirit of unity in conflict" (HE 41). This struggle "is not the destructive passion of a wild brigand but is, rather, the creator of unity. The unity it finds is more profound than any ephemeral sympathy or coalition of interests; adversaries meet in the shaking of a given meaning, and so create a new way of being human—perhaps the only mode that offers hope amid the storm of the world: the unity of the shaken but undaunted" (HE 43).

The novelty of the political life lies, then, in the fact that it understands that free life can only be maintained in a community where the free do not kill one another, but where they create and preserve for their struggle an open space in which they are in accord. The "*polis*", the Greek community, is such a place, which arose at the dawn of history as something which had never occurred before, as a community of the free who agreed on the laws, on the *rules*, on something which they explicitly view as *right* and which they are prepared to respect now on as *a right*. The Greek community, *polis*, has a *politeia*, a constitution engraved on stone and on display in a public place, a

set of laws by which the community is instituted and which emerge, in controversy and dispute, as something which ultimately stands above the parties to controversy and makes possible their freedom.

The constituting of the community does not however mean the end of struggle. That which has been clinched—the space of freedom—is permanently threatened, not only from without, but most of all from within. “Historical action becomes a denial of that which in the developing situation poses the greatest danger of internal and external destruction of what has been clinched, and a repetition of that which is true possibility. That possibility however is never definitive and safe from threat. What seems at first to be a point of departure and indicates for a certain time the route, can now be lost and be shown to be a diversion when confronted with a deeper test. Success can blind one and become an enticement, with fateful results.” (CW 264) The struggle therefore can never end, one must be always on alert and, when necessary, ready to intervene. But who knows when it is necessary? Even on that point there must be, and will be, dispute.

### *The common source of politics and philosophy*

In our view, it is somewhere here that we might want to look for the emergence of philosophy. To those free and responsible it is not enough that they have agreed on something, that they have imposed laws on themselves because they believed them to be right. Since they see the fragility and controversy from which the laws of the community have arisen and by which those laws are constantly threatened, they would like to know whether they are *really* good, what *in reality* threatens them—they would like to know how matters *really* stand regardless of who has triumphed in conflict, regardless of a given situation. They would like to know *the truth itself*. But truth which is independent of situation, independent of how we understand it and

independent of the result of the struggle which we lead over it with things and with others, cannot be the truth about particulars which are paramount in a situation. The question of what is truth, where truth is non-relative and cannot become falsehood in a changed situation, is a question which can only be put when we emerge from situation and confront the whole. It is the question which seeks "a measure of what is and what is not, letting us judge what there is in terms of something firm and evident." (HE 12). Such a demand leads to the birth of philosophy which treats of the Being of what-there-is in general.

In his reading of Heraclitus, Patočka finds support for his thesis that it is one and the same problematicity that gives birth to the *polis* and that is present at the birth of philosophy. Heraclitus perceives the controversy, *polemos*, from which arises the community and that same *polemos* is for him what forges the unity and sustains the cosmos of the whole. In a single step, then, there arises a treatment of the whole of life and of the whole of the world, explicitly in problematicity. Philosophy, too, is born as a rising by which man enters the epoch of history. "Life unsheltered, a life of outreach and initiative without pause nor ease, is not simply a life of different goals, contents or structures rather than a life of acceptance—it is differently, since it itself opens up the possibility for which it reaches; while *seeing* this liberation, both the dependence of the one and the free superiority of the other, sees what life is and can be. Without aspiring to the superhuman, it becomes freely human. That, however, means life on the boundary which makes life an encounter with what there is, on the boundary of all that is where this whole remains insistent because something quite other than individual entities emerges here... since it has glimpsed the possibility of authentic life, that is, life as a whole, the *world* opens itself to it for the first time... as the whole of that which opens up against the black backdrop of closed night. This whole

now speaks to humans *directly*, free of the muting effect of tradition and myth, only by it do they seek to be accepted and held responsible" (HE 39).

Philosophy, as well as politics, then, is a matter for the free, responsible individual. But philosophy is concerned with something other than the responsibility of conducting oneself in a situation. It is concerned with what response a philosopher will give when he has emerged from situation and when he thus confronts things no longer as components of a situation, insofar as within that situation they either have or do not have meaning, but insofar as they *are* what they are. He confronts things as that what is, insofar as their Being is concerned. In other words he does not confront 'individual things', but rather the 'whole', which Patočka terms 'the world'; he confronts the fact that all things 'in the world'—in this 'whole'—somehow appear and disappear. He confronts their manifestation itself, that 'which opens up against the black backdrop of closed night.'

### *Philosophy as an attempt at life in truth*

What is for Patočka most important, and is that into which in his view the whole new human situation is distilled, is precisely the discovery of this contrast, of this antithesis, of the "manifesting of things" and of the "black backdrop" against which they appear, which is not, however, a thing at all and which the responsible thinker must after all treat as nothing. "The discovery" of that "nothing" which is at the root of every existence, is at the same time that which shakes the new human situation—the most shaking or shocking. This opposition of existence and Being, as Heidegger would put it, is what Patočka has in mind when he talks, with Heraclitus, of *polemos*.

At the beginning of history, then, a person gains an understanding of the shocking precariousness of everything, which, as we have seen, is expressed in the emergence of responsible conduct and the emergence of the

*polis* and is distilled in philosophy. In this distilled sense Patočka can then say that “The point of history is not what can be uprooted or shaken, but rather the openness to the source of the shaking.” (HE 44)

Once again we see in Patočka’s expression the ambiguity which we have already referred to. “The openness to the source of the shaking”—a source which, as we saw, is nothing (no thing), but which presents itself as if it were a piece of positive knowledge. This “openness” after all, according to Patočka and his Heraclitus “truly sees into the nature of things”—it says “how it is with things”, it is the “wisdom” that “says what is uncovered”, meaning that it tells the *truth* and enables “the doing of what is thus understood in its fundamental nature” (HE 42-43). It seems, then, that this philosophical insight itself enables one to conduct oneself *correctly*.

We saw, however, that in actual conduct this is not, and cannot be, the case. Certainly “the power generated by strife is no blind force” but rather “knows and sees” (HE 42). It sustains itself, after all, by seeing what is right and must constantly have in view its opponent who wants to arrange things differently. It must take care to ensure that it is still creditable, that it is still right and that it is still indeed a power. But as to the question what should be done—or rather what is in a given situation correct—here nothing at all can be learnt from philosophy. Philosophy’s sphere of competence is, after all, external to situation. That sphere of competence is just there where it endeavours to transcend all situations, where it confronts their *being*, the negation which is hidden by virtue of the fact that, instead of showing itself, it shows beings and gives us things and situations. This confrontation is what philosophy attempts to bring news of. What then is the source of the feeling that philosophical news about the confrontation with Being should improve our orientation in a situation, or even ensure that our orientation is in fact the right one?

The answer to this question is far from easy and we will attempt to provide only a rough sketch. Heidegger's philosophy, which Patočka takes as his guide in his consideration of history, treats man as a creature who is concerned with his own being. He assumes that man always already understands in some way his own Being and Being as such. This understanding, which is not primarily at all explicit, is that which makes man a creature living in possibilities—it is that which enables him to be a temporal creature who confronts things, fellows and himself in the world such that he goes beyond his present, reaching into the future and the past. Man is thus essentially free, meaning that he has precisely this possibility of confronting something, of letting existence be as it is—the possibility that is of living in truth, which at once implies the possibility that he may not grasp the truth. In the light of *how* and *that* he understands Being, things are shown to him, the things, his fellows, his situation and he himself. But his freedom goes further. That freedom, as an understanding of Being, “is, in the end, freedom for truth, in the form of uncovering of Being itself, of its truth, and not only of what-is” (HE 49). Man is always essentially related to being, even in myth. The liberation from myth is then a liberation to man's essential possibility, to the possibility of the explicit realisation of his relatedness to Being. It is the liberation to history, which is not now a “drama which unfolds before our eyes but a responsible realization of the relation which humans are” (HE 49). Freedom, then, “is not an aspect of human nature but rather means that Being itself is finite, that it lives in the shaking of all the naive ‘certainties’ that would find a home among what-is so that they would not need to admit to themselves that humans have no home other than this all-revealing and free being which for that very reason cannot ‘be’ as particular existents are. It is Being in its mystery and wonder—that Being is. The uncovering of Being itself, however, takes place in philosophy and in its primordial, radical

questioning. " (HE 49). Man thus shares this most profound freedom with Being: the way in which "Being is" is not an arbitrary human achievement, although it will not get by without human endeavour. While in myth that endeavour was unconscious and passive, in history, in which philosophy exists, man actively and explicitly endeavours. He produces philosophical doctrines and systems. On the one hand the problematicity of the situated, human conduct, reflected in responsibility, brings about man's emergence from situation and his reflection on being. On the other hand, however, his 'naive' habit of dealing and "getting on" with things and of relying on 'certainties', which have been accomplished, which he has gained in what is, forces him to thus reify Being and inhabit it by the means of philosophical systems just as there is an inhabiting of what-is. Being does not, however, allow this to the responsible one, who is engaged in a radical questioning, precisely because Being is not a thing at all. His questioning is therefore "an ever renewed attempt at life in truth" (HE 49), which collapses again and again, constantly ends with a shaking leading again into problematicity: "Being itself is finite". In view of the essential connectedness between man and being "this uncovering inevitably brings it about that not only the range of accessible existents but the very world of a particular epoch is subject to change. Since the rise of philosophy, history is more than aught else this inner history of the world as being, as distinct from what-is, yet as appropriate to it as the Being of what is" (HE 49-50).

History is then the history of the world, of Being, which in various epochs reveals itself variously in philosophical questioning. But as the world changes so does the range of accessible existents and so does the way in which we understand things, fellows and ourselves. In this indirect way, then, philosophical uncovering influences the world in which we act. In a different world there are of course different things and different situations and there

therefore must be different conduct. "Life in truth" does not, however, in any way mean the possessing of some concrete knowledge or having at one's disposal a measure of truth and rightness independent of situation, the search for which might have been a point of departure for philosophical endeavour. Rather it can only mean—as ever failing anew—that man remains in "the openness to the shaking" (HE 44), that he remains in touch with the freedom of Being and disclosure itself, that he preserves his freedom. This itself was, however, categorised as a rising, as something thoroughly positive to the extent that it began to look as if "to live in truth" might mean to be always right and to know how to correctly, justly and "responsibly" handle each situation.

*Does history have a meaning?*

But let us attempt to trace this tendency to overestimate the usefulness of the results of philosophical considerations in the concrete *praxis* of conduct as it is treated in the third of the *Heretical Essays* in which Patočka asks whether *history has a meaning*, and in which he tackles the question of meaning in general. Patočka says that history emerges as the loss of the received meaning and that the rising from mythical unfreedom leads to the life of the free and responsible, the one who wishes to live above the level of life for life's sake. We must therefore bear in mind that in the last two centuries there has been an increasing tendency to talk of nihilism, of the loss of the meaning of human life and of human endeavour in this world, and of nothing having meaning, let alone history.

How has this come about? By refusing the meaningfulness of myth man, as we have seen, confronts problematicity and takes into his own hands the quest for the revelation of "access to a more profound meaning." (HE 63). In the community we "make room for an autonomous, purely human



meaningfulness, one of a mutual respect in activity" which goes beyond "the preservation of physical life" (HE 63). In the sphere of the community there is likewise a possible rivalry of philosophical inquiries which treat of the problematicity of Being and of the sense of existence as such, which seek to inquire into "the darkness out of which there shines a splintered light, without it being able to change night into day" (CW 71a). This change is, however, what is sought for in philosophy and politics. Man would like to be able to put the relative meaning, which a situation has for us and which we must always gain anew or help emerge, or struggle for, and which a situation may also lose, on firm ground, where it might be above situation and where it will not leave us begging should the meaning of a situation be lost. This tendency is nothing other than an attempt to avoid the possibility of a loss of meaning in a situation, and thus an attempt to find something that might be the source of absolute meaning.

*Fysis*, divine nature, is discovered, in which everything arises and falls without it itself passing away—*kosmos*, order, a proper state, which in this arising and falling of things remains firm and which may henceforth serve as the model of a developed community. The attempt to understand this order and to grasp its very basis with a definitive clarity, at the same time leads to the birth of systematic mathematics and philosophical metaphysics. The realised possibility of insight into unchanging truth in mathematics leads at once to the three great metaphysical doctrines of Plato, Democritus and Aristotle, each of which claims to offer the definitive truth of the *kosmos*. "Thus philosophy in its metaphysical form does shed that mystery which was the origin of the shock which gave rise to it—but the mystery catches up to it in the form of the mystery of the plurality of metaphysical concepts, fundamentally different perceptions of the nature of what there is as such." (HE 65-66) This plurality together with the historical circumstances of the

Hellenistic period lead to scepticism, showing that philosophy built on a cosmic order “cannot provide human life with a higher meaning which would be entirely positive”, a meaning which would be “free of the mystery engendered by the shaking of the primordial and modest meaning” of myth. (HE 66)

In this situation Christianity arises. The words of St Paul describe philosophy, which founds meaning on the cosmos, as folly; and will offer each individual immediate access to meaning provided by the transcendental God. Christianity’s denial of philosophical attempts to deal with problematicity is a denial only of a solution, but not of the question itself. After all the Christian God does not arise as self-evident. It is necessary to believe in God. God is a new answer to an old question. The answer is provided only to him who wishes to hear it, to him who has faith (CW 345-346). He, God, then provides absolute meaning. History as a rising, which explicitly attempts to come to terms with problematicity, goes on, therefore. Man turns to God and finds the meaning of his existence in the path to the gaining of eternal life in the next world. In contrast to this, our world in which we live as mortal beings loses its own meaning by this turn. All sense which it has arises from God, and if we desire to know that sense we must turn to God. He provides us with the faculty of reason, which we can therefore rely upon. Reliable knowledge of nature can only be gained if we reconstruct nature in the light of *a priori* conceptions of reason—in the light of ideas and of mathematical certainties, which are ultimately guaranteed by God. Thus, in the womb of Christianity, the possibility of modern mathematical natural science arises.

The great success of science leads to its “detachment from the Christian basis and its becoming increasingly a power in human life” (CW 347). Man, humanity, and human reason puts itself in a Godlike position. But the loss of

God would lead to a loss of meaning itself. To prevent the latter the historical conceptions which treat history as having meaning, preserve the structure of the Christian picture of history—they are secularisations of the Christian history of salvation” (CW 347). “Whether now it is about the idea of progress and perfectibility of the human soul, which can be raised to infinity..., whether it is about the dialectic of the absolute spirit”, which in history arrives at itself, “or about a conception according to which... the development of productive powers... leads to a human state signifying utter meaningfulness ” (CW 347). None of these can, however, provide that which it promises “because man is quite understandably incapable of creating meaning as a whole” (CW 348).

### *The rise of European nihilism*

Throughout this historical progress the original metaphysical tradition asserts itself. This tradition presents an attempt to derive the meaning of the human situation from the meaningfulness of what-is or Being itself, independent of man, whether that meaningfulness is to flow from the world of ideas or from the perfectness of God. It turned itself into an embodiment of the values and narrative of the great story of the history of salvation or of progress, as the case may be. Meaning was given out as a readymade gift. This conception, however, showed itself to be unsustainable. The highest values were unmasked as empty, the great story as false, but the conception of the need for absolute meaning remained. Because it was nowhere to be found, however, there started to be talk of nihilism. Because the world lacked a whole and absolute meaning, nothing—*nihil*—had meaning. Patočka cites Weischedel’s analysis of meaning<sup>3</sup> and brings the question to a head thus:

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<sup>3</sup> W. Weischedel, *Der Gott der Philosophen*, vol.2, 1971, pp. 165-182.

“partial and conditional meaning depends on the total and unconditional, it phenomenally gives way before it” (CW 65a). “Every individual meaning refers to a global meaning, every relative meaning to an absolute meaning” (HE 58). It seems that, for Patočka, “it follows that human life is not possible without either a naive or a critically acquired confidence in an absolute meaning” (HE 58).

Patočka accepts Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the nihilism of modern humanity according to which that which leads to nihilism is precisely the metaphysical endeavour to find meaning in absolute values derived from Being itself. Phenomenological analysis, as we have argued, shows that Being itself is “nothing”, the absence of all meaning, a “black backdrop”, a “closed night”. On the other hand it is just the understanding of Being, as we have pointed out, that is that openness for things which enables us to encounter things as at all meaningful. Patočka characterises this philosophical discovery as “the antinomy of Being and meaning”, as “the contradiction of the Being of what-is and absoluteness of meaning” which “Nietzsche sensed” (HE 59). He denies, however, the suggestion of Nietzsche that we settle for relative, situated meaning. He takes this to be a kind of “biologism” (CW 334), “the proclaiming the world nonsensical in the name of a creative life which can constitute a segment of what there is so that it acquires a *relative* meaning” (HE 59). Nowhere in the *Heretical Essays* does Patočka subject Nietzsche’s views to a profounder analysis, although he insists that Nietzsche’s solution is itself nihilistic: “in its practical unfolding, life cannot rest on a relative meaning which itself rests on meaninglessness, since no relative meaning can ever render the meaningless meaningful but, rather, is always itself dragged into meaninglessness by it” (HE 59).

In spite of this Patočka does not seek to deny that man is in some way the source of meaning: “We can speak of history where life becomes free and

whole, where it consciously builds room for an equally free life, not exhausted by mere acceptance, where after the shaking of life's 'small' meaning bestowed by acceptance, humans dare undertake new attempts at bestowing meaning on themselves in the light of the way the Being of the world into which they have been set manifests itself to them" (HE 40-41). He denies explicitly, however, that the bestowal of meaning might be in the power of our choice or will (HE 57): "it is not in our power to keep things from appearing meaningless under some circumstances and, hand in hand with that, to keep meaning from speaking to us from things if we are open to it" (HE 57).

### *The questionable meaning of existence*

What kind of solution, then, are we offered by Patočka?

On the one hand Patočka speaks of a shaking of the naively accepted absolute and relative meaning, of giving up the hope of an immediate givenness of meaning (HE 77), of the fact that "meaning is not a thing given openly and once and for all" (CW 66a), that "in meaning lies darkness...., which holds us in its sway such that while we may be able to avoid it we cannot eliminate it" (CW 66a).

On the other hand Patočka does not want to rid himself of the thought of absolute meaning. He denies "dogmatic nihilism", which "insists on meaninglessness as the final and indubitable fact" and wishes instead to go beyond nihilistic doubt to doubt even this doubt, to call into question even the seemingly indubitable fact of meaninglessness. (HE 74). With this step although doubt is not excluded, at least meaninglessness is now not a simple fact, but is a problem. The situation is similar now to that at the beginning of history. It is the situation of problematycity. What Patočka now suggests is not to repeat the metaphysico-religious attempts at finding a positive, complete

sense, but to finally retain and to take over this problematicity. To go out on the path of seeking, to be resolved to “live in permanent questions and in permanent *uncertainty*”, to join oneself to “this ground, which perhaps makes man a man, that is ....., to know about problematicity” (CW 349). To join oneself to this problematicity means for Patočka “to embrace history” (HE 118). History would not be arrested by nihilism, but would instead be able to continue as long as it explicitly rests on the principle from which it arose—as long as it does not seek to avoid problematicity. History would not then represent a “gradual unfolding of the meaningless of the universe, at least not necessarily, and it might perhaps even be possible for humankind to bring about... a meaningful existence” (HE 75).

Patočka thus offers a kind of *possibility*. This possibility that history *will* have meaning, that humankind *will succeed* in bringing about a meaningful existence, is in its realisation bound by a certain condition, in his view, which he formulates in his texts in various forms starting already in the second half of the sixties. This condition is “*the solidarity of the shaken*; the solidarity of those who are capable of understanding what life and death are all about, and so what history is about ” (HE 134). The fulfilment of this “condition” should have the form of “a gigantic conversion, of an unheard-of *metanoein* (HE 75).” This conversion “of historic proportions” should consist in humankind—or rather “that part of humanity which is capable of understanding what was and is the point of history” (HE 75-76), and which is “ever more driven... to accept responsibility for the meaninglessness”, in which this late phase of the scientifico-technical governance of the world finds itself—taking up “a stance of uprootedness in which alone an absolute meaningfulness might be realised: absolute but still accessible to humans, by virtue of its problematicity” (HE 76). This stance can be successfully taken up, though, only by “the ones who

understand..., that in reality they belong to each other in the common shaking of the everyday..." (HE 136)

*The solidarity of the shaken as a godless religion of insight*

This last requirement is then the requirement of "solidarity". It brings us back to the origin of the Greek *polis*. That which was shown to be right at the beginning of history with the emergence of the spirit of Europe, is valid today too, when the question is whether the European heritage will make itself felt in a global dimension: "We can speak of history where life becomes free and whole, where it consciously builds room for an equally free life, not exhausted by mere acceptance" (HE 40-41). That room, built in a spirit of fellow-feeling as common, should even make possible "the brotherhood of those who were shaken in their naïveté—a solidarity overcoming conflicts and disputes... " (CW 81a). It would seem that this part of the heritage is more or less clear and we can perhaps imagine it as a kind of worldwide democratic establishment which would create the basis for free competition without it leading to the destruction of the competitors.

But why does Patočka speak of a "conversion" (HE 75)? What is the source of his use of this term which in normal usage refers to the acceptance of religious faith? And why does this conversion demand "discipline and self-denial" (HE 76)? Although these words appear in the *Heretical Essays* only in one place, their use is revealing. In my view we must understand them in the context of another statement—in these essays also appearing once—which touches on a more detailed interpretation of the historical development of forms of responsibility, that is, the interpretation of how Christianity took over the Platonic concept of "care for the soul". At this point Patočka says that Christianity "remains ... the greatest, unsurpassed but also un-thought-

through human outreach that enabled humans to struggle against decadence” (HE 108).

It seems that Patočka’s attempt to uncover the sense of history should be and indeed is something like a thinking through of Christianity. That thinking through is, however, as we have already seen, deeply unchristian. After all its foremost feature is to abandon the conception of God as the giver of all sense. It is however very much conscious of its relation to Christianity and that is why it adopts the title *heretical*. What Patočka stands for is a kind of non-Christian Christianity—a religion which though it does not have God, remains religious in character. This is why it is necessary to talk of a conversion, and that on a gigantic, historical scale. It should be a conversion which gives rise to a new epoch, just as conversion from the mythical orgiastic ritual led to the emergence of the free, responsible individual situated in problematicity and founding the *polis*, or as conversion from this to Christianity led to man, on the condition of faith (CW 345), to set up a direct relation to God (HE 67; CW 346) and thus to gain “access to the ultimate, which is *meaningful* and bestowing of meaning”. (CW 345)

Similarly the point of this newly suggested conversion is, as we have seen, a condition. One of its components, solidarity, we have already mentioned. The second thing which is expected of a person is not, however, belief. It is insight, “understanding of what was and is the point of history” (HE 76). Those capable of conversion are “the ones who understand” (HE 136). It is an explicit embracing of problematicity—of just that which we spoke about when we described the beginning of history as a rising from the prehistorical fall. A person must maintain “the constant shaking of the naive sense of meaningfulness” (HE 61), “must not close its eyes before the darkness, before problematicities and disputes” (CW 81a), must bear the fact that in his life “positivity and unbroken innocence do not rule” (CW 81a).



Only if he consciously adopts this “stance of uprootedness”, can “an absolute meaning be realised: accessible to humans, by virtue of its problematicity” (HE 76).

The religious structure of this conversion is then not in doubt: on the condition of a certain understanding—which is analogical to faith—humankind gains access to “a new mode of meaning” (HE 61), which Patočka does not hesitate to call “absolute”, despite the fact that he knows, and in the same breath says, that it is a “conditional meaningfulness”, that it is a meaningfulness that arises only from this conversion. This conversion, though, is a kind of wager on certainty. Those who understand that Heraclitus’ “*polemos* is nothing one-sided, that it does not divide but unites”, have therefore touched that “which forms the ultimate unity and mystery of being”, and to touch this means “to touch divinity”, to be “capable of becoming gods” (HE 136).

The European heritage has then the form of a task: to learn “to accept meaning as a way” (HE 77), to maintain it, “to live in the meaning which presents itself as the fruit of darkness, which spreads itself in an unconquerable, concretely justified, way in the very basis of everything and which though it is always inexterminable, makes possible a seeking which both qualifies sense and is sufficient for sense.... ” (CW 81a). Such is the possibility for those who “pass through the experience of a loss of meaning”, “that the meaning to which we might perhaps return will no longer be for us simply a fact given directly in its integrity; rather, it will be a meaning we have thought through, seeking reasons and accepting responsibility for it (HE 60)”; “this meaning can arise only in activity which stems from a searching lack of meaning, as the vanishing point of being problematic, as an indirect epiphany.” (HE 60-61)

*The remnant of nihilism in Patočka's demand for an absolute sense*

Patočka's attempt to formulate a way out of the situation of crisis in which the world found itself at the beginning of the seventies in the twentieth century on both sides of the "iron curtain" is, as we have seen, shaped by an attempt to avoid a cheap metaphysical solution. His divergence from the teleology of the "great story" should be accepted without reservation. But why does he fall in with Weischedel's thesis of the necessity of absolute sense? Why does he make such a dogged attempt to derive some kind of absolute sense there where he has himself so persuasively shown that it cannot be found? The answer is not hard to see. Because he fears that if we give up the view that absolute meaning is indispensable it would imply a levelling—it would mean that "all human endeavour... is on the same level" (CW 349). It would then become quite indifferent what anyone does, and the whole conception of history as a rising from the fall would be threatened. There would then be no difference between a mere life for life's sake and the historical life of the rising "above the level of mere life" (CW 349).

What then does Patočka's exhortation that we "discover meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence" (HE 61) really mean? What does it mean "to live according to the hypothesis of meaning—to live as would be reasonable if all were to be in order with the world" (CW 349)? Is it not, after all, the "illusion of total meaning" (HE 59) of which Weischedel speaks and which he finds necessary to impute to those who are incapable of "critically acquired confidence in an absolute meaning" (HE 58), those who act without being concerned for some complete meaning as they are content with an understanding of the situation and perceive what is relatively meaningful precisely in the context of this situation? After all if the hypothesis of absolute meaning boils down to there *being* some meaning, although, in view of its

absence and elusiveness we never know *what* that meaning is, then the search for meaning amounts to nothing more than that we are finite, situated creatures to whom meaning is born from the problematicity which presses upon them in a situation and for which, along with others, they take responsibility. This meaning is, however, relative, bound to the situation from which it arose, and we must always secure it anew in a situation—help to let it arise or break through. And we may also fail. But we will not be able to prevent this failure by an appeal to absolute meaning, just as we do not prevent death by a faith in eternal life. We must take pains to ensure that our situations, our actions and our lives have sense, and this precisely because they are finite and in peril of meaninglessness. Without this finiteness, without the possibility of a loss of meaning, no meaning would be meaningful. Only in that scenario would everything be indifferent. Whether or not our actions are in fact a rising or a fall cannot be decided now by their being performed on the path of a “search which flows from [meaning’s] absence”, however determined that search may be: rather what will decide will always be, in the end, just as it was for Heraclitus, “the eternal glory among mortals”.

It seems, therefore, that despite all Patočka’s effort to liberate himself from metaphysics, his attempt to meet Weischedel’s demand and maintain at least a hypothetical hope for absolute meaning is, in its own way, nihilistic and still belongs to the history of onto-theo-logical metaphysics.

Translated by James Hill