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The Responsibility of the “Shaken”

Jan Patočka and his “Care for the Soul” in the “Post-European” World¹

The first three volumes of the Prague edition of Jan Patočka’s *Collected Works* bear the collective title “Care for the Soul.” It will be clear to any reader of Plato’s dialogues that this is a translation from the Greek, *epimeleia tēs psychēs*. It was more precisely the subject of a cycle of eleven private lectures that we arranged for Patočka, forced out of academe, to give in the homes of various friends and students in 1973-1974. Recorded on tape and transcribed, the series was then published as a samizdat volume under the title *Plato and Europe*.² Faced subsequently with the task of editing Patočka’s *Nachlass*, we realized, however, that we would do better to reserve the heading “Care for the Soul” for a wider use. The texts that come under it are to be found already among Patočka’s earliest works, and they form, in a sense, the core of his lifelong philosophical endeavor. At the very beginning of his career Jan Patočka repeatedly posed the question of what sense there is in becoming a professional philosopher, in devoting one’s entire life to philosophy. He was to remain faithful until his dying day to the answer he then articulated:

[P]hilosophizing is not a purely intellectual activity that can be exhaustively clarified and justified . . . Philosophizing presupposes an act of courage, risk and resolve, staking one’s life on a hope that may turn out to be misleading and unfulfillable. . . . [T]he philosopher should master the art of remaining his whole life long in what is, to a certain extent, a precarious position, as he can never, through acquired certainties, eradicate his own deciding.³

When we decided then to entitle the first three volumes of the *Collected Works* “Care for the Soul,” we added an explanatory subtitle defining the ensemble as “A Collection of Papers and Lectures on the Position of Man in the World and in History.” The high point of this introductory section is Patočka’s doubtless best-known work, the *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*.

The reason for placing the texts dealing with the philosophy of history at the beginning of the *Collected Works* can also be found in one of Patočka’s first publications. Along with Heidegger, Patočka realized in those early days that the human mode of Being, characterized mainly by freedom, is essentially different from

¹ This paper was presented at the workshop in Bergamo in May 2009.

² Cf. Jan PATOČKA, *Plato and Europe*, transl. P. Lom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

³ Jan PATOČKA, “Kapitoly ze současné filosofie” [Chapters from Contemporary Philosophy], in *Sebrané spisy*, sv. 1, *Péče o duši I*, ed. I. Chvatík and P. Kouba (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 1996), p. 87.

the mode of Being of things. Human freedom is transcending facticity through projecting possibilities. Yet this freedom is always anchored in a concrete situation. Distance from facticity does not mean that facticity has been done away with. Our facticity—i.e., our thrownness among things and situations created by the acts of those who projected their possibilities in the past—limits our freedom. Our free possibilities, which it is up to us to seize, are anchored in these limitations. The human mode of Being has, accordingly, a historical character.

Patočka feels, therefore, as a philosopher, the need to deal with history. As early as 1935, this brings him to make some essential distinctions.⁴ “Superficial,” “perfunctory” or “surface” history, “where events and their bearers are not described with a view toward grasping their *meaning* for life,”⁵ is distinguished from the description of “inner” or “deep” history, i.e., the historiography bent on grasping “life in flux with its possibilities, the coming together of which, in simultaneous unity, forms the world.”⁶ This “deep,” “universal” history has two faces: 1) “the philosophical history of the world in general,” meaning “the analysis and constitution of the world and time . . . from the viewpoint of philosophical reflection,” i.e., metaphysics and the history of the understanding of Being; and 2) “philosophy of history” in the sense of “the historiography of the world proper,” in other words, the reconstruction and interpretation of forces and powers active in history which interest us inasmuch as their significance and effect persist up to the present day.⁷

The texts on the philosophy of history assembled under the heading “Care for the Soul” were thus chosen to serve as an introduction to the *Collected Works* because they form the framework for Patočka’s further philosophical investigations. How do they relate to Plato’s concept of care for the soul? In what sense do they deserve the Platonic title we have bestowed upon them?

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It is clear from Patočka’s earliest writings that he views Plato and Plato’s Socrates not only as a prototype of all philosophizing but also as the true founders of European civilization, the spiritual forebears of Europe. According to Patočka, the hidden continuity of a philosophical endeavor can be traced throughout the spiritual history of Europe—a project aiming at life founded in rational insight. Beginning with Socrates, the figure of the responsible human individual is anchored in this endeavor.

Patočka explains his understanding of the philosophical “care for the soul” in the first of the two texts quoted above:

If the creator of a philosophy is himself a strong personality, he can succeed in fulfilling the philosopher’s greatest task—in being not only the self-consciousness, but rather the true living conscience of his time:

⁴ Cf. Jan PATOČKA, “Několik poznámek o pojmu ‘světových dějin’” [A Few Remarks on the Concept of “World History”], in *Sebrané spisy*, sv. 1, op. cit., p. 46-57; see French translation: “Quelques remarques sur le concept d’histoire universelle” in Jan PATOČKA, *L’Europe après l’Europe*, ed. and transl. E. Abrams (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2007), pp. 155-171.

⁵ Ibid., p. 51/162 (Czech/French).

⁶ Ibid., p. 55/169 (Czech/French).

⁷ Ibid.

he can put the finishing touches to this life-form and criticize it through his own life, bring its ideals to completion, give them a new turn and a new form; put question marks in front of dead ends so as to bring to the fore what such a person is capable of presenting us with as alone worthy and noble. Socrates was such a philosopher . . . In the beginning [of philosophy] was the deed, a deed which meant the possibility to criticize life in all its components and manifestations, to criticize it in ultimate depth, to inquire into its ultimate and exclusive end, in regard to which all individual ends are but means. Socrates was this deed.⁸

Comparing these words, written in 1936, with what Patočka has to say in the texts and lectures from his later years, we may succeed in coming closer to his understanding of this Socratic deed in a way that will at the same time cast light on the connection between the various philosophical themes he dealt with over the whole of his intellectual career.

In the third of the *Heretical Essays*—“Does History Have a Meaning?”—Patočka approaches this question through a reflection on the “relation between the concepts of meaning and of Being.”⁹ He evokes Heidegger’s motif of the phenomenon of loss of meaning, the experience of the nullity of all things, through which we can explicitly relate to Being and realize the wonder of wonders: that being *is*. Passing through the negativity of meaning confronts us with the positivity of being which is, however, neutral with respect to meaning. “[A]nd it is *the same* beings that manifest themselves now as meaningful, now as meaningless.”¹⁰ Returning to existent things after the experience of ontological anxiety, the moral we should bring back with us is as follows:

Undergoing the experience of the loss of meaning means that the meaning to which we shall perhaps return will no longer be for us simply a fact given directly in its integrity; rather, it will be a reflected meaning, in search of a ground it will be able to answer for. As a result, meaning will never be simply given or acquired once and for all. . . . [M]eaning can arise only in an activity which stems from a searching lack of meaning, as the vanishing point of problematicity, as an indirect epiphany. If we are not mistaken, then this discovering of meaning in the seeking ensuing from its absence, as a new project of life, is the meaning of Socrates’ existence.¹¹

It is immediately clear that Patočka interprets Socrates in 1973 in about the same way as in 1936. This time, however, the question concerns not only the beginning of philosophy, but also the beginning of history. Socrates as a philosophical symbol marks the turning point which, according to Patočka, separates the “pre-historical”

⁸ Jan Patočka, “Kapitoly . . .,” op. cit., p. 98

⁹ Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. J. Dodd, transl. E. Kohák, (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1996), p. 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60-61.

epoch from “history proper.” History proper, in his view, is at once the history of Europe and the history of the care for the soul. Or again, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, clarifying and completing Patočka’s analyses on several points in his long essay *Donner la Mort*¹²—the first part of which was presented in 1992 as a lecture at the Central European University in Prague—“the history of responsibility.”

In this paper, I would like to attempt to delve deeper into the conclusion Patočka reaches concerning this history, and to suggest ways in which we ourselves might resume and continue his train of thought.

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In a discussion with a group of young divinity students subsequent to the publication of the second edition of his 1936 thesis on the “natural world”—an encounter which took place some time in 1972 and which we succeeded in taping¹³—Patočka clearly formulates the motivation behind his concept of the philosophy of history: the wish to find a way out of the “relativistic nihilism” of the present world situation.

As we have already indicated, history proper is, for Patočka, the history of human understanding of the world and of the human situation in the world, insofar as it represents life *above* the level of simple self-consuming sustenance. As early as the 1930s, Patočka characterizes this movement toward a higher level of life than the that of mere animals as an *upswing*. Prior to this historical upswing, mankind was nearly completely absorbed by providing for sustenance. Humans, however, differ from animals in that even the most primitive people exceed in some way this biological level. The initial transcending can be summed up under the headings of “rite” and “myth.” Patočka connects this mode of transcendence with the pre-historical period. History proper begins only when man explicitly realizes that rising above the mere biological level may be what it means to be human.

Today, relativistic nihilism—which for Patočka means more or less the same as Heidegger’s *Gestell*—seems to represent a downward movement, bringing life back to the level of mere sustenance, albeit in a much more sophisticated form than in pre-historic times. In comparison to the upswing of history, the present state is thus, in fact, a *decline*. This explains the question which serves as title to the fifth of the *Heretical Essays*: “Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?”¹⁴ An affirmative answer would mean that history has reached its end, that we have come back to the pre-historic level, to a form of life concerned exclusively with sustaining itself (in relative luxury).

Confronted with this situation, Patočka adopts the following strategy: if history is the history of human understanding, and if understanding is something historical, then this understanding not only changes in the course of history but preserves its former figures. Older forms of understanding retreat or are pushed into the background, grafted onto or absorbed by subsequent avatars, but there is

¹² Jacques DERRIDA, “Donner la mort,” in Jean-Michel RABATE and Michael WETZEL (eds.), *L'éthique du don. Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don* (Paris: Métailié-Transition, 1992); *The Gift of Death*, transl. D. Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹³ Published in French translation: Jan PATOČKA, “Le christianisme et le monde naturel,” transl. E. Abrams, *Istina*, Vol. XXXVIII, no. 1, 1993, pp. 16-22.

¹⁴ Jan PATOČKA, *Heretical Essays ...*, op. cit., pp. 95-118.

continuity. On the basis of this continuity Patočka proposes to deploy a rescue operation.

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Patočka divides history up to the present day into two major periods. The dividing line is the birth of Christianity. Each of the two great periods is defined by an epoch-making upheaval, or “conversion,” a change in humans’ understanding of themselves and the world. To rescue us from today’s decline, Patočka suggests nothing less than a new “gigantic conversion,” “an unheard-of *metanoein*,”¹⁵ that would thus be the third in the line of conversions. We shall see later that the Greek word “*metanoein*,” and the Latin-derived “conversion” (*konverze*), both part of the Christian lexicon, are not used here by chance.

The first conversion is presented in the fifth of Patočka’s *Heretical Essays* through an explication of life in decline following Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time*.¹⁶ Man relates to himself in a different way than to all other beings. Man is interested in himself, his life makes a difference to him: he is interested in his Being, *bearer* and *executor* of his own Being. As Heidegger says, his Being is “*überantwortet*” to him, delivered over to him, assigned to his care. From “*überantworten*,” there is but a tiny step to “*verantworten*,” with its meaning of responsibility: *how* he bears his Being is up to him, he answers for it. How, then, should he bear it? When Heidegger says with Pindarus: “be who you are! be yourself!”¹⁷ his meaning is not immediately clear, and he himself, after several hundred pages of explanation, admits that he is not satisfied with the result. Patočka answers the same question in his fifth essay through a shortcut reminiscent of Heidegger: “True, authentic Being consists in our ability to let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying it its own Being and its own nature,”¹⁸ i.e., neither distorting our own nature, our essence, our humanity—authentic Being consists for us in being truly human.

What does that mean—to be truly human? We seem to end up in a vicious circle. Both Patočka and Heidegger are aware of this, and it was already clear to poets and philosophers at the dawn of history. Avoiding this circle is not only a difficult task for philosophers in the abstract, it also concerns our practical everyday lives. To employ all our forces to this end means to live in upswing. To refuse this task or to attempt to ease the burden of it means to live in decline. But these are not questions people ask simply off the bat. Patočka, by bringing to light the genealogy of this whole line of questioning, adds a useful supplement to Heidegger’s analysis of human existence and its authenticity.

Coming back to the first conversion, we can define it as the passage from pre-historical life in myth to the life of a free being confronted with the whole of what-is, and called on to prove him or herself with no support in the traditional, mythical understanding of the world inherited from the past. This passage is a gradual process.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁷ PINDARUS, *Pythian Ode II*, 72: “*Gennoi hoios essi mathōn*.”

¹⁸ Jan PATOČKA, *Heretical Essays ...*, op. cit., p. 98.

In the mythical world the gods reign as an unquestioned matter of course. Humans occupy a modest place, called upon above all to provide for their own sustenance. A necessary part of this concern is service to the divine rulers on whom human life is dependent in every respect. In sacred rites, humans fall prey to an orgiastic exaltation that swallows them up entirely in a demonic way, but at the same time raises them rudimentarily above the level of providing for sheer survival.¹⁹ In contrast to this sacred exaltation, the concern for sustenance is progressively understood as toil, as a burden.²⁰ (Animals, having no relation to the divine, do not feel this concern as a burden.) The sacral orgy then takes on the added function of relieving this burden, and appears, thereby, as its indispensable counterpart. Patočka shows the ambiguity of this orgiastic sacrality. It is an upswing inasmuch as it raises above the level of mere sustenance, but also a decline, a direct threat to man in his sustenance and self-reproduction, inasmuch as it falls prey to demonic ecstasy.²¹ Because of this ambiguity, one cannot view the opposition of the sacred and the profane as equivalent to Heidegger's opposition between authentic existence and the inauthentic decadence of "the ordinary day in which we can lose ourselves among the things that preoccupy us."²² Heidegger does not seem to have taken into account this orgiastic-sexual side of human life. Yet precisely this aspect is essential to the structure of the human mode of Being. According to Patočka, history begins when and where the ambiguity of this sphere is first thematized.

All of this means that the orgiastic dimension cannot be overpowered, but must be related to responsibility by grafting onto responsible life, as Patočka explains in the first pages of the fifth essay.²³ Man progressively succeeds in disciplining it through interiorization. In epic and dramatic poetry, in the Olympic games, the orgy is symbolically displayed to the spectator who can thus experience it in his innermost self, in his soul. It is a kind of sacred *theōria* through which orgiastic rupture with the everyday is cleansed of demonic destructiveness. "This relating to responsibility, that is, to the domain of human authenticity and truth, is probably the germinal cell of the history of religion."²⁴

Man then begins asking explicit questions which thematize, with everyday sobriety, the problematicity of the human condition. The sacred functions as the disciplined moving force of this development. Hermes lends Odysseus a helping hand, Athena calms the Erinyes, Eros with Diotima urges man to tend toward beauty and, ultimately, toward *diakosmēsis*, procreation in beauty, and efforts in view of organizing a good society. Interiorization progressively gives birth to a new, disciplined man who becomes aware of his individuality, of his freedom. This process is the emergence of the individual soul. *Theōria* is extended to encompass the entire universe. Man leaves myth behind and stands face to face with the universe as a whole. Philosophy and politics come into existence, history begins—"as a rising above decadence, as the realization that life hitherto had been a life in decadence and

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 100-102.

²² Ibid., p. 99.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 101.

that there is or that there are possibilities of living differently”²⁵ than in toil and orgy. This new possibility is the free life in the city-state—the Greek *polis*.

On leaving myth behind, man is profoundly shaken, put into a position hitherto reserved for the gods, while at the same time realizing that he is not equal to this task. Pre-Socratic philosophers seek to gain anew a solid foothold, no longer on mythical ground, handed down from the past, but on the present basis of their own insight, be it with the help of the gods, as described in Parmenides—a foundation that can be nothing elusive or inconspicuously changing, but must, on the contrary, be perfectly stable, eternal, divine.

Philosophical attempts to secure such a foundation repeatedly fail. The sophists discover the power of discourse, capable of relativizing anything firm, upholding tyrannical views which lead the *polis* to its ruin. Socrates in turn mercilessly analyzes everything that had till then been taken for granted, viewed as certain, unchanging and clear, not in order to relativize it, but rather to show, through dialogue with his fellow citizens, where they are going wrong, misunderstanding or contradicting themselves in their views on the good conduct of life. He who contradicts himself is empty, hollow, i.e., actually inexistent, though he hides this from himself through empty discourse. Socrates shames those he confutes, but gives no advice; faithful to his “non-knowing,” he endeavors to lead their soul to tell for itself good from evil. On the backdrop of unbridled sophistry, and as its counterpart, Socrates thus develops a technique of dialogue as serious philosophical reflection known as dialectic—a rigorous technique of assessing the value of human opinions and ideas, a method that enables to discern which opinions are viable, sensible, good—and which are not. These dialogues with his fellow citizens are what he calls “care for the soul.”

Socrates, whom Patočka presents as Plato’s forerunner, is however not enough for Plato and his time. He asks the right question, but does not give a clear, positive answer. The question of where to find a firm ground on which to base human reasoning can no longer be put off. The answer is given by Plato who reinforces Socrates’ dialectic as a means of rising above the deceitful world of appearances and politics to the divine world of unchanging, constant, eternal Ideas, the highest of which is the Idea of the Good. The care for the soul now acquires a new meaning. The task of the soul becomes to acquire knowledge of the constant, rational and divine structure of the universe, represented by the consistent, non-contradictory system of the Ideas, in order to become itself consistent and non-contradictory. Only in becoming thus constant and consistent with itself will the soul be able to attain a vision of the Good that is *above* the Ideas and serves as their ultimate foundation. “This view is as unchanging and eternal as the Good itself.”²⁶ The journey in search of the Good undertaken by Plato’s care for the soul leads ultimately to the immortality of the soul, an immortality “different from the immortality of the mysteries. For the first time in history it is individual immortality, individual because inner, inseparably bound up with its own achievement.”²⁷

The result of the first conversion is thus an individual, free and responsible soul, which chooses its destiny and remains in its heart of hearts the bearer of a

²⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

²⁷ Ibid.

disciplined sacred orgasm as an inherent part of itself. Yet, despite its inner life, this soul retains a trait of exteriority: the Platonic lover of wisdom relates to the divine impersonal Good as he would to an external object.

The falsity of the Platonic relation to the Good is revealed by Christianity, which shows it to be an intellectual construct. The Platonic lover of wisdom assumes erroneously—i.e., “believes” merely—that he is in direct rational contact with his metaphysical mainstay. St. Paul labels Greek philosophy “foolishness.”²⁸

Christianity is more realistic. It maintains that the divine Good is transcendent, infinitely exceeding man, and cannot be mastered through human knowledge. Instead of the philosophers’ chimeric belief, Christianity offers a faith that is not grounded in reason alone. Christianity transforms the impersonal absolute Good into a personal God who, being the absolute Good, is infinitely Beneficent.²⁹ To give faith to this “good message,” to the evangel of Christ, is to undergo a “second” conversion.

Before the infinite Beneficence of God all men are always already guilty, however hard they try not to sin; man is guilty because he can never, in his finitude, perceive all the circumstances and consequences of his acts. The relation between man and God is fundamentally asymmetric. God, being omniscient, sees man absolutely, in the inmost depth of his being, whereas man has no direct access to God as transcendent. Thus God sees man secretly and from within.³⁰ Man, conscious of being at all times seen “from within,” learns to see himself in a God’s eye view and becomes far more interiorized than in Platonism, relating in his inner being at once to himself and to the personal, yet inaccessible God. Man relates to himself as a sinner and to God as infinite Beneficence, as a person he begs to forgive his ever-present sin. The intimate relation of the always sinning to the infinitely Beneficent by whom he is seen secretly from within gives birth to a new figure of the human individuality. The human soul has now a hidden, secret interiority which it shares only with God; following God’s view, it sees how it is in itself, *per se*, regardless of its role in society. In relation to the *personal* God, the human being becomes a *person*. The transformation of God into a person and the transformation of man into a person is one and the same transformation. Patočka, however, remarks: “What a person is, that is not really adequately thematized in the Christian perspective.”³¹

The problem of overcoming the everyday and the orgiastic—i.e., the task of history proper, taken over by Christianity from Greek Antiquity—remains moreover unsolved.³² The new-born person with his deepened individuality is gradually contaminated by individualism, bent solely on playing an important role in society.³³ Reprobate Platonic rationalism remains active, leading to the triumphal march of modern natural science and the endeavor to build a similarly successful rational theology. The contradictoriness of this attempt to acquire *more geometrico* an exact knowledge of God himself is unveiled by Immanuel Kant. Shortly afterwards Friedrich Nietzsche denounces Christianity as nihilistic. Traditional Christian

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 1: 20: “hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”

²⁹ Cf. Jan PATOČKA, *Heretical Essays ...*, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

³⁰ Cf. Jacques DERRIDA, op. cit., p. 102/109 (French/English).

³¹ Jan PATOČKA, *Heretical Essays ...*, op. cit., p. 107.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 115.

sacrality no longer fulfills its task of disciplining the orgiastic,³⁴ no longer channels and gives meaning to the aspiration to rise above the everyday.

In the meantime modern technicized society is emerging, and the knowledge of the universe that “had originally in Plato been a bulwark against orgiastic irresponsibility . . . passe[s] into the service of everydayness.”³⁵ Its sole meaning is henceforth to facilitate total mastery of nature, in thrall to the less and less toilsome, more and more profligate maintenance of life. Thanks to technology, labor is no longer a hardship, and man conceives hope of eventually freeing himself of it completely. It makes way, however, for boredom, while orgiastic energy finds an outlet in wars, genocides and political witch-hunts.³⁶ The original upward impulse of the second conversion ends in decadent nihilism. From this point of view, there is no difference between totalitarian dictatorship and liberal democracy which both bring humanity back to a well-nigh pre-historical level.

In his introduction to the above-mentioned 1973 private lecture series known as *Plato and Europe* Patočka raises the question of what can be done here. He answers with no hesitation: the first step is to reflect on the situation in which we find ourselves. “The naive situation and the conscious one are two different situations.”³⁷ The entire train of thought we have followed in Patočka is just such a reflection on our present situation. Let us now take it further. What else does Patočka analyze as characteristic of our times?

First of all he undertakes an in-depth reflection on Heidegger’s notion of *Gestell*. Patočka largely agrees with Heidegger’s analysis of the presently reigning mode of Being, but not with his suggestion as concerns the means of seeing this era to its end. In a period of worsening Communist dictatorship, Patočka does not want to merely “prepare readiness”³⁸ and wait for salvation from the realm of art. He interprets the domination of *Gestell* as a conflict within Being: after the collapse of metaphysics, positive science and its outgrowth, technology, have succeeded in so far-reachingly uncovering what-is that this discovery has completely covered up, concealed the understanding of Being which makes it possible. Patočka proposes to solve through conflict the conflict in Being consisting in revealedness causing concealment—to solve it, more precisely, by means of a sacrifice which would not be for anything existent but rather for appearing as such: to overturn the total leveling down to the sustaining of life for life and make clear that man is fully human only when he exceeds this level.

The idea of this authentic sacrifice in Patočka may appear to be of Christian origin. In the “meditation” he added in 1970, by way of afterword, to the second Czech edition of his 1936 thesis, *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*, he parallels the Christic sacrifice to the death of Socrates in the context of the “third

³⁴ Ibid., p. 113.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 112-113.

³⁷ Jan PATOČKA, *Plato and Europe*, op. cit., p. 1.

³⁸ Martin HEIDEGGER, “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten,” *Der Spiegel*, no. 23, 1976, p. 209. See English transl. by W. Richardson: “Only a God Can Save Us,” in T. SHEEHAN (ed.), *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent Press, 1981), pp. 45-67

movement of human existence.”³⁹ Both sacrificed their lives in order to make something apparent, to show that humanity is fully human only if it overcomes its bondage to life, insofar as it is capable of living above the level of mere sustenance. Through his appearance, through his endeavor to care for his soul, the perfect man of truth—Christ, Socrates—launches an attack against everything that governs the world of decline, closed off in the sphere of mere concern for survival. For this reason, he is condemned and put to death. Both Socrates and Christ could have avoided violent death yet both willingly underwent it. And in both cases their sacrifice was connected with the idea of immortality. Such is precisely the meaning of the “third movement”: to break through the level of sheer survival and open it up to the dimension which, though no being, is nonetheless the condition of the world of existing things.⁴⁰

In a private seminar a few years later, Patočka goes even further. He takes up once again the motif of Christ’s sacrifice, citing the last words of Christ on the cross: “Eli, Eli, why hast thou forsaken me?” What Patočka suggests here is already a passage to the third conversion. He refuses to take these words as a rhetorical question, viewing them rather as a statement of fact: God has forsaken us. The idea of eternal life after death and the promise of bliss beyond is, with regard to the horrors of this world, crude cynicism.⁴¹ The sacrifice must be carried through to the very end, to ultimate nothingness, to make apparent that the divine—what is really governing the world—is no being, be it the supreme being, but rather a non-being, NOTHING, i.e., appearing as such.

Patočka was a phenomenologist. That is to say that the problematic of manifestation, of appearing, of the phenomenon, was at the center of his attention throughout his life. In the 1950s, he made an explicit attempt to connect this topic with the theme of history, and started work on a project meant to fulfill the task he set himself in the 1935 article quoted above, i.e., to sketch a “universal history”⁴² of the European world in the philosophical sense. Apart from the introductory study, entitled “Negative Platonism,”⁴³ a detailed outline of eight chapters⁴⁴ and several unfinished texts coming under this heading were found among his papers after his death. The themes touched on were to be dealt with later under other titles, reemerging in the

³⁹ Jan PATOČKA, “‘Přirozený svět’ v meditaci svého autora po třiatřiceti letech,” in *Přirozený svět jako filosofický problém*, ed. I. Chvatík and P. Kouba (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1992), pp. 249-250. See also French translation: “Méditation sur *Le monde naturel comme problème philosophique*,” in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, ed. and transl. E. Abrams (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 122-123.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 251/124 (Czech/French).

⁴¹ Jan PATOČKA, “Čtyři semináře k problému Evropy” [Four Seminars on the Problem of Europe], in *Sebrané spisy*, sv. 3, *Péče o duši III*, ed. I. Chvatík and P. Kouba (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2002), p. 403. See also French translation: “Séminaire sur l’ère technique,” in Jan PATOČKA, *Liberté et Sacrifice. Écrits politiques*, ed. and transl. E. Abrams (Grenoble: Millon, 1990), p. 299.

⁴² Jan PATOČKA, “Několik poznámek ...,” *op. cit.*, p. 55; “Quelques remarques ...,” *op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁴³ Jan PATOČKA, “Negative Platonism: Reflections concerning the Rise, the Scope and the Demise of Metaphysics—and Whether Philosophy Can Survive It,” in *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, ed. and transl. E. Kohák (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 175-206.

⁴⁴ See French translation in Jan Patočka, *Liberté et sacrifice ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 379-381.

studies on “asubjective phenomenology,” the doctrine of the “three movements of human existence,” or the philosophy of history laid out in the *Heretical Essays*.

The introductory essay, “Negative Platonism,” is of interest to us here in two respects. On the one hand it shows clearly why and in what sense Patočka distinguishes between Socrates’ and Plato’s philosophy, while on the other making clear in what way he contemplated following in Plato’s footsteps.

As stated above, Patočka views Socrates as a prototype of the philosopher in general. “Socrates’ mastery lies in absolute freedom: he is constantly freeing himself of all the bonds of nature, of tradition . . . , of all physical and spiritual possessions.”⁴⁵ By means of his questioning, which is a “negation of all finite assertions,”⁴⁶ he enters “a space in which nothing real provides support,”⁴⁷ and so “uncover[s] one of the fundamental contradictions of being human, the contradiction between man’s intrinsic and inalienable relation to the whole, and his inability . . . of expressing this relation in the form of ordinary finite knowledge.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, Patočka sees Plato as offering an answer to the Socratic question. It is he who, in the “space in which nothing real provides support,” beyond the ultimate limits of our whirligig world of phenomena, builds, or better said, happens upon “the other world,” the world of transcendent Ideas, of absolutely positive realities which are the true source of knowledge. Plato is thus for Patočka the founder of metaphysics, whereas Socrates “did not venture into metaphysics proper.”⁴⁹ If overcoming metaphysics has now become indispensable, we shall have to “understand metaphysics itself, extracting from it, in a purified form, its essential philosophic will, and bearing and carrying it further.”⁵⁰ The pre-metaphysical Socrates, grasped by Plato along with his care for the soul but, according to Patočka, exploited in an inappropriate, i.e., metaphysical way, is claimed by Patočka’s *Heretical Essays* for what we have been calling the “third conversion.” The inspiration drawn from Socratic philosophy will concern the motif of human freedom and, conjointly, the ability of humans to transcend all objective givenness toward a “non-being,” toward the non-objective “Idea” (in the singular) which is now the symbol of freedom and an abbreviation of the whole realm of what makes man human in contrast to animals. This motif leads to a new, “asubjective” concept of human subjectivity: the Idea “stands above both subjective and objective existents,”⁵¹ i.e., above both the process of experience and its material content. “The experience of freedom takes place in man, man is its locus—but that does not mean that he is adequate to this experience.”⁵² The Idea “is what gives to see . . . Not in the purely . . . sensory sense in which animals also see; rather, it gives to see . . . in a ‘spiritual’ sense in which one can say that we see, we apprehend in that which is

⁴⁵ Jan Patočka, “Negative Platonism . . .,” op. cit., p. 180.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 195.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 200.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 200-201.

given . . . something more than is directly contained in the givenness . . . [W]e apprehend more than we perceive.”⁵³ “All conceptions according to which the Idea is not simply something thanks to which we see,” adds Patočka, “but also that *which* we *ultimately see* [my emphasis] are anthropomorphic.”⁵⁴ This is where the forces of memory and recollection, of fantasy, combination and negation spring from.⁵⁵ Finally, what is most important for Patočka’s conception of history as an upward movement: the philosophy of negative Platonism “preserves for humans the possibility of relying on a truth that is not relative and ‘mundane,’ even though it cannot be formulated positively, in terms of content.”⁵⁶ This philosophy justifies the struggle of man “for something elevated above the natural and the traditional . . . , against the relativism of values and norms—even while agreeing with the idea of the fundamental historicity of man and the relativity of his orientation in his environment, [the relativity] of his science and practice.”⁵⁷

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Let us try, then, to formulate what belongs in the framework of the third conversion.

At the end of the sixth and final “heretical essay,” after the nightmarish description of the twentieth century as war, Patočka states explicitly that “the means by which this state [i.e., war in the form of Force’s planning for peace] can be overcome is the *solidarity of the shaken*.”⁵⁸ In the context of the foregoing analysis of front-line experiences, concentration camps, and persecution of dissidents it might seem that Patočka’s “shaken” are but the lucky few who have survived these various trials and tribulations. I suspect that would be a serious mistake. The shock due to these boundary experiences is merely an extremely acute symptom of another shock which has hit the majority of mankind and been going on for many decades already (having in fact begun more than two hundred years ago)—the shock due to the death of God and the collapse of metaphysics. These two losses are equivalent to the loss of absolute meaning—the dreaded Nietzschean *nihil* is here. Absolute values, absolute meaning, hope of absolute truth, be it in infinity, hope of absolute justice in the Christian paradise—all of this has vanished with the smoke from the conflagrations lit by twentieth century wars. To quote Patočka: “dogmatic nihilism [is] a correlate of dogmatic assertions of meaningfulness, of those theses which metaphysics, and the dogmatic theology associated with it, has taken credit for.”⁵⁹ With this epochal shock, our situation resembles that in Ancient Greece at the time of the first conversion, and everything indicates that Patočka indeed means to draw this parallel. We dare suppose that a similar shock also foreshadowed the birth of Christianity. Christianity is again

⁵³ Ibid., p. 199.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 202-203.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 199-200.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 205.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 206.

⁵⁸ Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays* ..., op. cit., p. 134.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

at issue today, although in an opposite sense. Whereas in the second conversion faith was acquired, here faith is being lost. In the above-quoted passage of the sixth essay, at the beginning of the next paragraph, Patočka speaks again of “[t]he solidarity of the shaken—shaken in their *faith* [my emphasis] in the day, in ‘life’ and ‘peace.’”⁶⁰ In the context, the quotation marks clearly mean the idealized form of these concepts, guaranteed by God.

The starting-point is thus an epochal shock. Two sentences after first mentioning the solidarity of the shaken, Patočka identifies those shaken as “persons of spirit,” “capable of conversion.”⁶¹ To leave no doubt as to the parallel intended with the first and second conversion, the normal Czech word for *turn* (*obrat*) is associated here with the *Greek* term for the *Christian* conversion: *metanoia*. The “shaken” “persons of spirit” are then characterized as “those who are capable of understanding what life and death are all about, and so what history is about.”⁶² That is to say—in Patočka’s words, as concerns history—“history is the conflict of *mere life*, bare and chained by fear, with *life at the peak*.”⁶³ Patočka’s emphasis on the verb “is” clearly indicates that he means here the essence of history, i.e., what history is at its core, and as we have already seen, history is where there is an upswing, where humans rise in some way above the level of mere self-sustaining life, even risking their lives to maintain themselves above this level. If man is not willing to slave to bare life, Force or *Gestell* threatens him with death. The person of spirit nonetheless refuses such slavery as below his dignity. Should things go that far, he will be willing to sacrifice his life. For what? Nothing. Simply to *show* that such a slavish “living just to live” is not what life is all about. And this is exactly what Patočka says next: the understanding of persons of spirit “must in the present circumstances involve . . . the basic level, that of slavery and of freedom with respect to life.”⁶⁴

But that is not enough. Just as important or perhaps even more so is what is said at the end of the third essay, when Patočka explicitly thematizes the problematicity of absolute meaning.⁶⁵ Here, he does not yet speak of the solidarity of the shaken, but the *Greek* word *metanoesis* (verbal noun = *metanoia*) is already present and, with it, the exigency of the third conversion. Just as in the sixth essay, it concerns “that part of humanity which is capable of understanding what was and is the point of history.”⁶⁶ And here too, the point is an *upward move*. It is now quite sure: the point of history is to rise above the level of mere self-sustaining life. And here, toward the end of this essay inquiring after the possible meaning of history, Patočka states clearly what this move is aiming at: it is “a reaching for meaning.”⁶⁷ Reaching for meaning in a situation where meaning has been lost, where instead of meaning there is nothing, *nihil*. Of course, the relative meaning of providing for sheer

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 134-135.

⁶² Ibid., p. 134.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 75-76.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

survival, dictated by the Force of the *Gestell*, has not been lost. But, as Wilhelm Weischedel argues, without absolute meaning, all relative meaning is, in last resort, meaningless.

We come here to the most baffling passage of Patočka's *Heretical Essays*. They who understand what history is all about should be "capable of the discipline and self-denial demanded by the stance of unanchoredness in which alone a meaningfulness both absolute and accessible to humans, because problematic, can be realized."⁶⁸ Which meaning, then? *Absolute* or *problematic*? How can Patočka afford such an absolute contradiction?

Here at last we come back to Socrates and his care for the soul. How else indeed are we to understand Patočka's stating and asking, for example: "Humans cannot live in the certitude of meaninglessness. But does that mean that they cannot live with a sought for and problematic meaning?"⁶⁹ To quest for meaning while at the same time knowing it to be questionable, realizing that any super-temporal, absolute meaning once and for all is sheer nonsense—that is precisely what Socrates was doing, dialoguing with his fellow citizens and dispelling their illusions as to the value of their naive and dogmatic beliefs. A few lines lower down on the same page we come on an inconspicuous, yet very important note: "Perhaps Socrates knew this."⁷⁰

We understand now why Patočka needed to construct a Socrates distinct from Plato, despite the fact that the substance of our knowledge of Socrates all comes from Plato's dialogues. He needed a Socrates who had not yet succumbed to the urge to find or invent an absolute foundation.

What does it mean that the persons of spirit who are today "at the peak of technoscience" are driven to "take responsibility for meaninglessness"⁷¹? How are we to understand "taking responsibility for meaninglessness" if not as admitting guilt in the loss of meaning and pledging ourselves to ascertain what should be done to change this situation, so as not to repeat the same mistakes. That is precisely what Socrates brings his partners in debate to understand. It is a matter of mobilizing all the powers of the mind in order to search, in a serious and disciplined debate of the soul with itself, or better, with others, for what *good* can be done in a given situation. This quest for the good in a situation is precisely Socrates' care for the soul. It presupposes no metaphysical contact with the absolute Good. It is a reaching for meaning under the guidance of the Idea as Patočka formulated it in his "Negative Platonism," a reaching meant to rise above the level of mere sustenance. In this sense, the meaning discovered by the Socratic dialectic is absolute. It is not a relativistic "all is allowed." And it does not matter that this meaning may, in a new situation, turn out to be false and lead to decline. One has simply to try and try again.

To be sure, this hermeneutical structure of responsible human decision-making is something we already know from Christianity. There it had the form of sin, forgiveness and repentance. It is familiar to Heidegger too, in *Being and Time*, under the heading of *Wiederholung*, "repetition."

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 76.

And let us not forget the “self-denial”⁷² mentioned by Patočka in relation to the third conversion. To understand this, we must recall what we have already seen concerning the primordial demonic, orgiastic drive, disciplined and preserved throughout the two previous conversions. This is still to be maintained in the third conversion, in the disciplined form of “self-denial,” as a motor or hormone pushing mankind to reach upwards.

After the death of God, or shall we say rather, now that God has forsaken us, now that—shaken to the bottom of our soul by the two world wars—we have at last grasped this fact, we cannot go on believing in an immortal soul. Nonetheless, the structure the soul acquired in Christianity remains. Man has assimilated as his own the God’s eye view, he has learned that he must answer for his deeds—no longer to a transcendent God who sees him secretly, but to himself (cf. Heidegger’s voice of conscience and even Socrates’ *daimonion*) and others who also take up the position of intimate witness. In contact with God, our soul has learned that it is not in its power to act with complete knowledge of the situation and, hence, that it inevitably bears a burden of “sin.” But there is no more *mysterium tremendum*, our soul need no longer tremble in the uncertainty of mercy or eternal damnation. It is quite capable of damning itself for sure. But it has also learned to repent of its sins and so knows how to reflect and put right in repetition the wrong it has done. What previously was cause for trembling, i.e., the impossibility to found our decisions on absolute knowledge, is now explicitly thematized as a situation of problematicity which we must endure, projecting meaning in Socratic debate with ourselves and others, with no absolute support. Our only “foothold” can and must be the wonder—neutral as far as meaningfulness is concerned—that being *is*, that it *appears*, and that we are part of this miracle of appearing. The support we find in this foothold is no alleviation in our problematic situation, nothing to ease our decisions. It is up to us, through our intelligence, to reconsider always again what is *good* to do in our given situation, up to us to answer for our acts, to ourselves and to others, to judge what we have done. One can, as of old, call the miracle of Being and appearing (*that* being *is* and that it *appears*) “divine”, but it is no absolute Tribunal, above all because we ourselves—to *whom* being appears—are part of the miracle.

The regard for the miracle of appearing and existing, for this mysterious Nothing, is what distinguishes this new and shocking human position from the Nietzschean solution as presented by Patočka. In both cases man is able to bestow meaning only on a small part of the world within the reach of his mind. But whereas in Nietzsche this sense-bestowing is relative (depending only on man’s own will—and, in this sense, all is allowed), Patočka understands man as a partner in the miracle of appearing in which the others too have a share, along with all the objective non-ego which appears. So long as humans are open in such a way, respecting others and working with them in solidarity in the hermeneutic circle of sense-bestowing in which things appear (Patočka would say with Heidegger: so long as humans “let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying it its own Being and its own nature”),⁷³ all is not “allowed” to them, free as they may be. Their essential post-metaphysical freedom, acquired through the shock of the loss of God, is precisely what brings them to decide for solidarity with those who have undergone a similar shock and, thus, to maintain life above the level of mere sustenance and, again and again, to find meaning

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 98.

for it. They maintain life in an upward surge which makes it possible for it to have authentic history. One example of such a solidarity of the shaken, and consequently of historical action, will surely be, in the future also, the maintenance of an open space for social freedom where people like Socrates and Patočka will not be made to die for political reasons.

In this conception, the miracle of appearing and Being cannot be said to be an instance of absolute meaning as called for by Weischedel (quoted by Patočka) in view of the possibility of meaningful acts. If we were to say that this miracle enables us to find meaning in our acts just as it makes possible our appearing to ourselves, i.e., our existing, we would have to admit forthwith that the miracle of appearing also makes possible for our acts to prove meaningless, and for ourselves to cease to appear to ourselves and to others. In the hermeneutical quest and constitution of meaning, absolute meaning is not necessary for acts to be meaningful. It is fully made up for by the blundering, fumbling, groping solidarity of the shaken.