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### *Jan Patočka's "Care for the Soul" in the "Nihilistic" World*

"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 that of mere animals as an *upswing*. Prior to this historical upswing, mankind was nearly completely absorbed by providing for sustenance. Even the most primitive people exceed however, 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.

History up to the present day comprises, according to Patočka, 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 nihilistic decline, Patočka suggests nothing less than a new "gigantic conversion," "an unheard-of *metanoein*"<sup>1</sup> that would thus be the third in the line of conversions.

The first conversion can be defined as the passage from pre-historical life in myth to the life of a free human being confronted with the whole of what-is, and called on to prove himself with no support in the traditional, mythical understanding of the world inherited from the past. This passage is a gradual process.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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, inasmuch as it falls prey to demonic ecstasy.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan PATOČKA, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. J. Dodd, transl. E. Kohák (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

All of this means that the orgiastic dimension cannot be overpowered, but must be related to responsibility by grafting onto responsible life.<sup>5</sup> Man progressively succeeds in disciplining it through interiorization. In epic and dramatic poetry, in the Olympic games, etc., the orgy is symbolically displayed to the spectator who can thus experience it in his innermost self, in his soul. It is a sacred *theōria* through which orgiastic rupture with the everyday is cleansed of demonic destructiveness.

Man then begins asking explicit questions which thematize the problematicity of the human condition. Sacred orgiasm functions as the disciplined moving force of this development. 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 now extended to encompass the entire universe. Philosophy and politics come into existence, history begins—“as the realization that life hitherto had been a life in decadence and that . . . there are possibilities of living differently”<sup>6</sup> 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, but on the present basis of their own insight. This foundation 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 too mercilessly analyzes, in a manner similar to that of sophists, everything that had till then been taken for granted, viewed as certain, unchanging and clear. He does not do so, however, in order to relativize it, but rather to show, through dialogue with his fellow citizens, where they are contradicting themselves in their views on the good conduct of life. 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. 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. These dialogues with his fellow citizens are what he calls “care for the soul.”

For Plato and his time, Socrates seems not to be enough. He asks the right question, but does not give a positive answer. The question of where to find a firm ground on which to base human reasoning is answered 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 Forms. 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 system of the Forms, in order to become itself consistent and non-contradictory. Only thus will the soul be able to attain a vision of the Good that is *above* the Forms. The journey in search of the Good undertaken by Plato’s care for the soul leads ultimately to the immortality of the soul, “different from the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

immortality of the mysteries. For the first time in history it is individual immortality, individual because inner, inseparably bound up with its own achievement.”<sup>7</sup>

The result of the first conversion is thus an individual, free and responsible soul, which chooses its destiny and remains in its heart the bearer of a disciplined sacred orgasm as an inherent part of itself. Yet, despite its inner life, this soul retains a trait of exteriority: the Platonic philosopher 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. 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.”<sup>8</sup>

Christianity is more realistic. It maintains that the divine Good is transcendent and cannot be mastered through human knowledge. Instead of the philosophers’ chimerical belief, Christianity offers a faith that is not grounded in reason alone. Christianity transforms the impersonal absolute Good into a personal God who is infinitely Beneficent.<sup>9</sup> To give faith to this “good message” is to undergo a “second” conversion.

Before the infinite Beneficence of God, all men are always already guilty because they can never, in their finitude, perceive all the circumstances and consequences of their acts. God omniscient sees man in the inmost depth of his being. 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. The intimate relation of the always sinning to the infinitely Beneficent gives birth to a new figure of the human individuality. The human soul has now a hidden, secret interiority. Following God’s view, it sees how it is in itself, *per se*. 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.

The problem of overcoming the everyday and the orgiastic—i.e., the task of history proper, taken over by Christianity from Greek Antiquity—remains however unsolved.<sup>10</sup> The new-born person with his deepened individuality is gradually contaminated by individualism, bent solely on playing an important role in society.<sup>11</sup> Reprobate Platonic rationalism remains active, leading to the triumphal march of modern natural science, since nature, in Christianity, has no place in the eschatology of salvation. Nature is given to man to care for and rule over. There is no longer anything divine in nature. It can, therefore, become an object of rational, i.e., mathematical, reconstruction. Henceforth, the sole meaning of nature is to serve human needs. Denied any further significance, the reality of nature is thus ultimately meaningless.

Ironically, the success of natural science leads to 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.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 1: 20: “hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jan PATOČKA, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 115.

Shortly afterwards, Friedrich Nietzsche denounces Christianity as nihilistic. Traditional Christian sacrality no longer fulfills its task of disciplining the orgiastic,<sup>12</sup> no longer channels and gives meaning to the aspiration to rise above the everyday. Modern technicized society, submitting nature to the more and more profligate maintenance of life, falls prey to boredom, while orgiastic energy finds an outlet in wars, genocides and political witch-hunts.<sup>13</sup> There is nothing left of the original upward impulse of the second conversion.

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In his private lectures and seminars, as well as in his essays from the 1970s, Patočka raises the question of what can be done here. First of all he undertakes an in-depth reflection on Heidegger's notion of *Gestell*. Patočka largely agrees with Heidegger's analysis of *Gestell* as the presently reigning mode of Being, but not with his suggestion as concerns the means of seeing this era to its end. He does not want to merely "prepare readiness"<sup>14</sup> 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 has succeeded in so far-reachingly uncovering what-is that this discovery has completely covered up, concealed what makes it possible, i.e., man's understanding of Being. The human mode of Being is thus mutilated in its very essence. *Gestell* allows for no understanding of a difference of ranks in Being. There is no longer anything divine in the world; everything, including man, has the same ontological status as a source of power that can be accumulated and used for further accumulation of power. Yet there are signs that the rule of *Gestell* is not absolute.

One of these signs, according to Patočka, is the fact that we still speak of "sacrifice." The understanding of a difference of ranks in Being remains present in this concept, though inappropriate in the era of *Gestell*. In mythical sacrifice, man addressed the divine as a higher rank of Being. Those who lay down their life for their family or the community of which they are members also experience a difference of rank. Such traditional examples of sacrifice, where one existent is offered up and exchanged for another, are however merely "preliminary." Authentic sacrifice is where one offers up one's own life purely as a means of opposing *Gestell* in its tendency to level everything down to the sustaining of life for life, in order to make it clear that man is fully human only when he rises above this level. Authentic sacrifice opposes the self-evidence of *Gestell* and insists on its problematicity. Not a sacrifice for any existent, it is, in this sense, sacrificing for nothing. It boils down to simply persevering in the specifically human mode of Being: to live in upswing, to accomplish understanding of Being while opposing violation by *Gestell*, means more than merely to preserve one's existence. Authentic sacrifice works as an example. Showing what it means to be fully human, it is in this sense a sacrifice for appearing as such and, hence, for everything and everybody.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 112-113.

<sup>14</sup> Martin HEIDEGGER, "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," in *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.

Patočka's idea of authentic sacrifice may appear to be Christian in inspiration, but Patočka parallels the Christic sacrifice to the death of Socrates.<sup>15</sup> Both sacrificed their lives in order to make apparent that humanity is fully human only in overcoming bondage to life, in proving capable of living above the level of mere sustenance.

At the end of the sixth "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*."<sup>16</sup> 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 the wars of the twentieth century.

With this epochal shock, our situation resembles that of Ancient Greece at the time of the first conversion, and everything indicates that Patočka indeed means to draw this parallel. A similar shock also foreshadowed the birth of Christianity. Christianity is again at issue today, although in an opposite sense. Whereas in the second conversion faith was acquired, here faith is being lost.

The starting-point is thus an epochal shock which Patočka views as leading ultimately to disengagement from the reign of *Gestell*. This disengagement, to which he ascribes the significance of an epochal turn in the understanding of Being, has been heralded by authentic sacrifices. It is a turn accomplished, a conversion undergone by "persons of spirit," i.e., precisely those who are capable of such a sacrifice, "those who are capable of understanding what life and death are all about, and so what history is about."<sup>17</sup>

What, then, is at stake in history, today and in the future? What should the upward move aim at? In a situation where all is void of meaning, it will have to be "a reaching for meaning."<sup>18</sup> Of course, the relative meaning of providing for survival (life for life), dictated by the Force of the *Gestell*, has not been lost. But, as Wilhelm Weischedel argues, without an absolute, total meaning, all relative meaning is, in last resort, meaningless.<sup>19</sup> Patočka takes Weischedel's analysis seriously and says: Yes,

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. 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.

<sup>16</sup> Jan PATOČKA, *Heretical Essays ...*, p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

“man cannot produce the meaning of the whole.”<sup>20</sup> But neither can man truly act without this meaning of the whole. There is an *aporia* here, a strange deadlock.<sup>21</sup> Let us try however to conceive an *aporia* of this sort as fundamentally characteristic of the human way of Being. We have seen that this *aporia* emerges as highly topical precisely in the above-mentioned epochal conversions. It was twice side-tracked by postulating an absolute, transcendent instance. This should not be attempted a third time.

Patočka suggests here that historical man *is* this *aporia*. We must understand that this *aporia* does not mean absurdity, an absolute negation of meaning, but merely problematicity. History is history when man knows about this problematicity and responds to it. To live above the level of mere life for life means just this. And that is why Patočka says: Those 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.”<sup>22</sup> We must expose ourselves to problematicity, ask questions and attempt to answer them: build hypotheses of meaning and act as if this hypothetical meaning were real.

This brings us back to Socrates and his care for the soul. 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 utter 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. 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”<sup>23</sup>? 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 given situation is precisely Socrates’ care for the soul. It presupposes no metaphysical contact with the absolute Good. It is 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,

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Patočka, “Mají dějiny nějaký smysl?” (lecture transcript, 1975), in *Sebrané spisy*, sv. 3, *Péče o duši III* (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2002), p. 348.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 343-345.

<sup>22</sup> Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays ...*, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

forgiveness and repentance. It is familiar to Heidegger too, in *Being and Time*, under the heading of *Wiederholung*, “repetition.”

And let us not forget the “self-denial”<sup>24</sup> 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.

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”),<sup>25</sup> 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 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 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.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 98.