

JAN PATOČKA'S TRASCENDENCE TO THE WORLD *

LA TRASCENDENCIA AL MUNDO SEGÚN JAN PATOČKA

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Abstract: This essay examines Czech philosopher Jan Patočka's phenomenology as a philosophy of freedom. It shows how Patočka's phenomenological concept of worldliness, initially cast within a largely philosophical framework as the domain of human action and transcendence, turned toward a philosophical history of the modern age, viewed as increasingly post-European. Patočka hoped for the moral renewal of a fallen modernity, led first by non-Europeans after the era of decolonization and then by a "solidarity of the shaken" during the dark 1970s of Czechoslovak normalization. The essay starts and concludes by considering the relation between his thought and his dissidence, a link that is more tenuous and indirect than some commentators suggest.

Resumen: Este ensayo examina la fenomenología del filósofo checo Jan Patočka como una filosofía de la libertad. Muestra cómo el concepto patočkiano de mundanidad, modelado inicialmente en un marco básicamente filosófico como el dominio de la acción humana y de su trascendencia, giró hacia una historia filosófica de la Modernidad, considerada crecientemente como post-europea. Patočka confiaba en la renovación moral de una Modernidad caída, liderada en un primer momento, tras la era de la descolonización, por no-europeos y, después, por una "solidaridad de los conmovidos" a lo largo de la oscura década de normalización checoslovaca en los 70. El ensayo arranca y concluye considerando la relación entre su pensamiento y su disidencia, un vínculo que es más tenue e indirecto de lo que algunos comentaristas sugieren.

Palabras clave: Patočka, Phenomenology, Freedom, Dissidence.

Key Words: Patočka, fenomenología, libertad, disidencia.

At the height of Czechoslovak normalization, as the septuagenarian philosopher Jan Patočka reviewed a lifetime of professional isolation, the playwright Václav Havel and former Prague Spring official Jiří Hajek asked him to serve as co-spokesman for the new Charter 77 dissident organization. Despite Patočka's initial hesitance, the invitation must have occasioned some excitement. Perhaps he even espied the potential for a political act to consummate his philosophical thought. His public defense of Charter 77 took the form of a plea for

* This essay is a slightly revised version of one entitled "The Terror and the Hope: Jan Patočka's Transcendence to the World", which appeared in *Schutzian Research*, 3 (2011), 185-202.

human rights, which was

nothing more than the conviction that even states, even society as a whole, are subject to the sovereignty of moral sentiment: that they recognize something unconditional that is higher than they are, something that is binding even on them, sacred, inviolable, and that in their power to establish and maintain a rule of law they seek to express this recognition.¹

In two manifestoes, Patočka defended the public significance of “moral sentiment” and “human rights”, of truth as a kind of tribunal born of private conviction, even as he characterized the Charter as “personal and moral”² rather than political.

Interestingly, the liberal vocabulary of rights did not appear elsewhere in his corpus; earlier manuscripts, in fact, characterized Western liberalism as an inessential political complement to modern rational civilization, a useful framework for protecting “the rights of rationality” but not a necessary partner³. Did Patočka see his final defense of rights as the political expression of a career-long philosophy, as recent commentary contends⁴, or did he view it as the strategic deployment of a timely liberal vocabulary, introduced by the 1975 Helsinki Accords and cynically touted by the Husák regime? What, in other words, was the relationship between Patočka’s phenomenology and his ultimate dissidence? I contend that we should beware of binding the final act too tightly to earlier scripts. If the invocation of rights on the one hand simply recast Patočka’s career-long dedication to higher purposes, to a life of “amplitude” over one of mere “equilibrium”⁵, it also foreclosed his commitment to transcendental freedom based on a negative metaphysics of open-human striving. A phenomenology of human freedom and self-transcendence could translate into public activ-

¹ “This conviction”, he continued, “is present in individuals as well, as the ground for living up to their obligations in private life, at work, and in public. The only genuine guarantee that humans will act not only out of greed and fear but freely, willingly, responsibly, lies in this conviction”. Patočka, “The Obligation to Resist Injustice”, in Erazim Kohák, ed., *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*, Chicago, Chicago, 1989, 341.

² Patočka, “The Obligation to Resist Injustice”, 342.

³ Patočka, “La surcivilisation et son conflit interne” in Patočka, *Liberté et sacrifice: Ecrits politiques*, trans Erika Abrams, Grenoble, Millon, 1990, 151, 120. NB: I have cited English, German, and French translations where available.

⁴ “For Patočka, this authentic resoluteness [celebrated in his later writing] meant becoming a human rights activist”. Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 2000, 86. See also Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Jan Patočka: L’Esprit de la Dissidence*, Paris, Michalon, 1998, and *Esprits d’Europe: Autour de Czesław Miłosz, Jan Patočka, István Bibó*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2005.

⁵ Patočka, “Equilibre et amplitude dans la vie”, in *Liberté et sacrifice*, 27-39.

ism, but it need not have taken a human rights format.

For Patočka, phenomenology was *the* moral philosophy of its age, albeit one that needed reorientation to correct the deficiencies of its founders⁶. The purview of a small group of specialists prior to 1989, Patočka has won new attention since the communist collapse, due in no small part to eulogies from notables such as Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, and Vaclav Havel. But thirty years *post mortem*, he is still outshone not only by more prominent phenomenologists but also by fellow Czech dissidents. Nonetheless, as scholars have begun to elaborate the various themes in his work, we can now locate Patočka in several historical narratives, most obviously the story of dissidence in Eastern Europe, but also the history of the philosophy and phenomenology he cherished⁷.

Another preoccupation of the secondary literature on Patočka is its effort to unravel the Husserlian and Heideggerean strands of his thought⁸. An ardent a disciple of both giants, Patočka was no mere epigone. Indeed, the attempt to bridge one of the greatest rifts in twentieth-century Continental thought—that between the founder of phenomenology and his wayward student—meant that he could not be a simple heir of either. But heir he was. And his lifelong commitment to the renewal of a decadent technological civilization drew direct inspiration from both men, from Husserl's *Crisis* and Heidegger's *Dasein*, Being-in-the-World. Patočka met Husserl during a 1929 student year in Paris, and received an invitation to work under him in 1933 in Freiburg, where he inter-

⁶ His English translator Erazim Kohák is correct to note the centrality of ethics in his thought. See Kohák, "Jan Patočka: A Philosophical Biography", in Kohák, ed. *Jan Patočka*, 52.

⁷ In English, the starting point is Erazim Kohák, "Jan Patočka: A Philosophical Biography", in Kohák, ed., *Jan Patočka*. Invaluable are also the essays of Ivan Chvatík, head of Prague Jan Patočka Archive founded in 1990; these are cited below. Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel* highlights the relation between Patočka's philosophy and dissidence. Edward F. Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age: Politics and Phenomenology in the Thought of Jan Patočka*, Albany, SUNY, 2002 interprets Patočka's thought as political philosophy. And Rodolphe Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task*, Stanford, Stanford, 2009, situates Patočka in the wider phenomenological arc of thinkers conceptualizing Europe's destiny. There is also a substantial literature in French, German, and Czech. The French, in particular, recognized his importance quite early. Consider, for example, the essays collected in Etienne Tassin and Marc Richir, eds., *Jan Patočka: Philosophie, Phénoménologie, Politique*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 1992. In Czech, see Petr Rezek, *Jan Patočka a věc fenomenologie*, Prague: Oikoymen, 1993; and Ivan Blecha, *Jan Patočka* (Olomouc: Votobia, 1997).

⁸ Kohák and Tucker favor the Husserlian, while Richard Rorty, in "The Seer of Prague: Influence of Czechoslovakian Philosopher Jan Patočka", first published in *The New Republic* (1991), prefers the Heideggerean. Rorty's essay is reprinted in Hagedorn and Sepp, eds. *Jan Patočka*, 50-58. Edward Findlay challenges the good-Patočka (democratic, Husserlian), bad-Patočka (dark, violent, Heideggerean) narrative of the Czech philosopher's earliest English publicists. See especially Findlay's Appendix, "Patočka's Reception in the English-language Literature", in *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*.

acted mostly with assistant Eugen Fink⁹. He famously became Husserl's liaison for the 1934 Prague Philosophical Congress, transmitting the letter that first outlined the *Crisis* project. Despite this devotion, Patočka became a stringent critic of his mentor: The remnants of Cartesianism, he complained, led the master to an overly theoretical and even mathematical worldview that focused on individual phenomena rather than highlighting the dynamic interpenetration of subject and object, self and world¹⁰. Paradoxically, this objectivism, the tendency to render the world in a set of discrete theoretical presences rather than as a protean field of presence and absence, was rooted in what Patočka saw as Husserl's cardinal sin: an overdeveloped subjectivism that reduced the world to the egological mind. This charge, of course, is familiar to students of phenomenology, but Patočka rendered it in very Husserlian terms: While he celebrated the founder's *epoché* as an act of freedom that emancipated humans from the objective facticity and naïve reality, he condemned the later egological *reduction* of experience to the transcendental subject for turning the world into a distanced and reflective object-presence rather than a constant field of engaged activity¹¹. The problem was twofold: Not only did the move artificially sever the subject from the world it observed, but it also turned that world into a mere thesis of the transcendent subject, denying it ontological priority.

Heidegger's Being-in-the-World corrected these errors by emphasizing the priority of our practical engagement with things over our theoretical observation of them; objects were *zuhanden* before they were *vorhanden*, to use his coinages. And yet Heidegger betrayed the promise both of his own insights and of Husserl's late improvisations when he turned away from human worldliness in the quest for the authenticity of anxious solitude, rejecting others as the anonymous 'they' and retreating from the social world. Whereas Husserl held out hope for the ethical renewal of a fallen humanity, Heidegger forsook all hope for human responsibility and reform. If Husserl promised a worldly un-

⁹ Fink's influence was crucial for Patočka's later asubjective phenomenology. See Fink and Patočka, *Briefe und Dokumente, 1933-1977*, eds. Michael Heitz and Bernhard Nessler, Freiburg/Munich, Karl Alber, 1999. On Fink and Husserl, see Ronald Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology*, New Haven, Yale, 2004.

¹⁰ Ivan Chvatík's "Jan Patočka and his Concept of an 'A-Subjective' Phenomenology" in *Phenomenology 2005: Selected Essays from Northern Europe*, Vol. IV, Part 1 (Bucharest: Zeta, 2007), 197-215, is helpful here.

¹¹ See for example, Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. Erazim Kohák, Chicago, Open Court, 1998, 123ff. The critique of Husserl seems somewhat unfair, since it freezes at Husserl's egological phase without acknowledging the lifeworld project that Patočka knew well.

derstanding that was restrained by Cartesian suppositions, Heidegger reneged on the very worldliness he had apparently championed. Ultimately, then, Heidegger foreclosed what Husserl left open, and the latter proved not only more humane than the former (as many critics aver), but also more human. For Patočka, however, only by combining and superseding the insights of these giants could a satisfactory phenomenology be achieved.

PHENOMENOLOGY AS A PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM

Like Edith Stein, Jan Patočka's life is often defined by his death. In March 1977, the philosopher succumbed to a brain hemorrhage after an eleven-hour interrogation by the Czech secret police, a tragically Socratic finale for a reluctant dissident. During a tumultuous life in which he enjoyed only a handful of years in his chosen teaching profession, the Prague philosopher presented a unique phenomenology of freedom admixing Husserlian, Heideggerean, and Platonic themes. Indeed, he read a commitment to human autonomy back into phenomenological history, finding it at the origin of the movement: When Husserl died in 1938, his Czech acolyte eulogized him in uncommon terms as a philosopher of freedom.

This conviction, that a human is free for the idea, free for truth, free to determine his own life, to the final objectives that he has the ability to reach, and is in no way subordinated to mere nature, is not simply an index of relations and fates—in this view Husserl fits within the great streams of thought who find their sources in Greek philosophy ... And to the belief in these heights of human history, on the invocation of the wide power of ideas over all of life, it is to this that the work of Edmund Husserl commits us.¹²

Thirty years later, in his *Introduction to Husserl's Phenomenology*, a *samizdat* mimeograph published in the hopeful days before Prague Spring, Patočka again commended his mentor's effort as "nothing less than a striving for freedom and complete autonomy for humankind"¹³. The statement highlights the

¹² Patočka, "Edmund Husserl zum Gedächtnis", in Hagedorn and Sepp, eds., *Jan Patočka*, 268-9.

¹³ Patočka, *An Introduction to Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Erazim Kohák, Chicago, Open Court, 1996, 167.

theme for which Patočka is best known: a concept of freedom entailing rejection of bonds of objectivity in favor of human ethical transcendence. Self-responsibility, he maintained, keeping the Husserlian formula but incorporating Heideggerean worldliness, could transform modern men from mere objects or resources for technical manipulation into free beings with a renewed purpose and interest in the world, integrating "humankind into the global matrix of a wholly new framework"¹⁴.

If freedom entailed human moral regeneration and self-transcendence, the phenomenological itinerary was its philosophical expression. And as philosophy's most important prospect, phenomenological intuition opened

"the perspective of the unity, of the mutual interlocking and interdependence of humans and the world, interdependence which will not let us consider the world without taking humans into account, or humans without taking into account the world"¹⁵.

Rejecting a technical worldview that condemned men and women to statistical anonymity and fixed the world in mechanical terms, Patočka cast Husserl as an ethical thinker for whom philosophy cleared avenues to the natural world of experience.

It seems fitting that Patočka would launch his most productive decade with a detailed "introduction" to Husserl's thought. The title, as Kohák notes, was overly modest, for the manuscript offered a novel reinterpretation highlighting the social and ethical significance of Husserlian phenomenology, drawing out themes that were provisional or muted in the *Urtexts*¹⁶. In Patočka's hands, Husserl became an activist thinker, a philosopher of free human responsibility, not simply a theorist of direct intuition; the founder's phenomenology, he maintained, represented "a concurrent reflection about the meaning of things and about the meaning of human life"¹⁷. And while Husserl never escaped Cartesian constraints, his eidetic and transcendental methods held tremendous emancipatory potential, for they liberated historically-situated human beings from mere circumstance and brought them before essential truths. Thus, phenomenology recalled humans to the manifestation of the world as a meaningful

¹⁴ Patočka, *Introduction*, 166-7.

¹⁵ Patočka, *Introduction*, 172.

¹⁶ Kohák, ed., *Jan Patočka*, 83.

¹⁷ Patočka, *Introduction*, 1.

relationship, a revelation that preceded its technical and scientific enframing, to use the Heideggerean term¹⁸.

Husserl's early arithmetical work was not clear on these points because it reflected the sway of Brentano's psychological empiricism, with its strong division between psychic and physical. The later texts, from *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas* onward, explained "how the subjective can and does reach the objective" by modifying Brentano's model of introspection into a new form of worldly intuition¹⁹. In classic Husserl, intentionality revealed not just factual presentations, but the *eidōs* or essence of a phenomenon, its unified presence and meaning, a synthetic whole²⁰. He discerned not just the thing perceived, but the experience of perceiving that lent the phenomenon its meaning and significance. Thus, Husserl's earliest liberatory move, his break with objectivizing science, was the split from Brentanian psychologism and the embrace of an intuitive method for discovering essences, acts, and laws beyond the confines of empirical fact. This intuition of essences, *pace* Adorno, was not a direct and controlling eidetic grasp but instead proceeded incompletely through particular situated instances. Human knowledge of essences and universals was therefore always situated in particular contexts²¹. In this collocation of essence, object, and act, averred Patočka, Husserl overcame the crisis at the heart of empirical science: its inability to achieve wider human meaning from strict empirical foundations²².

But it was Husserl's *epoché*, for Patočka, that finally liberated man from the tyranny of circumstance, opening the emancipatory prospect of transcendence even from within the world. Liberation from the mundane assumption of reality broke men from the hold of mere things, mere biological need, and rendered the world as a project of open horizons and possibilities.

The uncovering and the revealing of the world and of things in the world remains irreducible to the objective aspect of the world. This means that incarnate being is free with respect to the world, that it is not forced to accept it as finished, as it pre-

¹⁸ Patočka, *Introduction*, 14-17.

¹⁹ Patočka, *Introduction*, 59. For Patočka, Brentano remained something of a taint on Husserl's career, a staunch empiricist whose Cartesian leanings Husserl never fully escaped. For a thoughtful defense of Brentano against Patočka's criticisms, see Balázs M. Mezei, "Brentano, Cartesianism and Jan Patočka", *Brentano Studien* 5 (1994), 69-87.

²⁰ Patočka, *Introduction*, 63-4.

²¹ Patočka, *Introduction*, 41-55.

²² Patočka, *Introduction*, 26.

sents itself, but can also become aware how immensely it transcends everything given in that extreme distance which Husserl elaborated in his *epoché*. For the *epoché* is nothing other than the discovery of the freedom of the subject which is manifested in all transcendence—in our living in principle in horizons which first bestow full meaning on the present and that, in the words of the thinker, we are beings of the far reaches.²³

To be sure, Patočka was deeply critical of his mentor: he accused Husserl of reducing the *epoché* to a mere methodological operation—and even worse, of transcendentalizing it by treating it as the gateway for access to a purified aerie of the disinterested observer. Husserl exacerbated his error when, in rejecting objectivism, he fell prey to the counter ill of reducing the world to the transcendent 'I,' an outsized Fichtean subjectivity²⁴.

Along with Heidegger, Patočka rejected this subject-centered, 'theoretical' line, instead characterizing the *epoché* as an anthropological-cum-ethical movement of human transcendence within immanence, of freedom from the world *within* the world, allowing the aspirant to move beyond quotidian immediacy to an open horizon of being. In Patočka's hands, the *epoché* marked a human movement beyond facticity and a turn to the world beyond the self as a field of prospect and action. Freedom is a "distance", he wrote in 1953's "Negative Platonism", a "remove" from all objectivities, a beyond from which the whole world became evident²⁵. Or as he put it in his introduction to Husserl, the subject's "freedom is manifested in that, within its dependence and no less for it, it is capable of truth"²⁶. Man was not imprisoned by the relativities of his surroundings or the fragmented empirics of modern science. For in outward, *ekstatic* movements, humans approached truths beyond their mortal selves. And the world, newly understood in Patočka's thought, stood beyond all things as their permanent horizon, irreducible to either subject or object status²⁷. Despite Husserl, the *epoché* was not a static concept or philosophical method, but a seismic historical event—indeed, it was history itself, as we will see below.

Patočka found other bases for freedom in Husserl as well. Through the in-

²³ Patočka, *Introduction*, 135

²⁴ See Patočka's 1976 essay "Cartesianism and Phenomenology" in Kohák, ed., *Jan Patočka*, 285-326. See also Chvatík, "Jan Patočka and his Concept of an 'A-Subjective' Phenomenology".

²⁵ Patočka, "Negative Platonism", in Kohák, ed., *Jan Patočka*, 196.

²⁶ Patočka, *Introduction*, 159.

²⁷ Patočka, *Introduction*, 104-06.

carnate body, the "point zero" of experience, humans received the world, touching the near and seeing the far. As the corporeal basis of "the 'I can,'" bodily kinesthesia offered the "consciousness of freedom"²⁸. And from this locale, this localized subject, we make our first acquaintance with phenomena themselves—not scientific but intensely poetic and meaningful: the "merciless blue of the sky above"²⁹. Science abstracted from this primordial encounter.

But the body, noted Patočka, "is essentially need-full, and as need-full it is finite and mortal", embedded in and confined to straitened circumstances³⁰. And the solitary one could not provide access to the wider world as trans-subjective horizon, the world beyond the self though not wholly other³¹. Only the recognition of others, of intersubjective community, could render subjective phenomena worldly, and thus open a horizon for activity. Moreover, in a rather more obvious point, only the primordial recognition of intersubjectivity could grant us society. For "what else is the intersubjective reduction", asked Patočka,

than the reassurance that anything that calls itself 'I' cannot be wholly alien, that, for all that separates it, it is not hopeless to attempt to approach another, to address one another, to understand one another. ...In principle, no I stands outside the possibility of communication, no I is isolated, each is in its own way an inflection of all others as all others are inflections of its own.³²

The point is crucial for moral awareness. An ethical society combined the recognition of far truths worth striving for with the essential nearness of community and locale. At once situated and transcendent, the ethical person sacrificed herself for community in the name of truth, which was not "a finished thesis but rather a process", an ongoing encounter, an open idea³³. And freedom, he wrote elsewhere, "does not mean only life *for oneself* alone", but also "from

²⁸ Patočka, *Introduction*, 141-42, 144.

²⁹ Patočka, *Introduction*, 137.

³⁰ Patočka, *Introduction*, 145.

³¹ Patočka adopted the concept of *non-aliud*, not-other, from Nicholas of Cusa and used it to describe the situation in which the world could neither be reduced to the subject nor entirely divorced from it. On Patočka's relation to Cusa and other late medieval and Renaissance thinkers, see the essays collected in *Andere Wege in die Moderne: Forschungsbeiträge zu Patočkas Genealogie der Neuzeit*, Ludger Hagedorn and Hans Rainer Sepp, eds., Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006.

³² Patočka, *Introduction*, 160.

³³ Patočka, *Introduction*, 166. In an important postwar essay, Patočka distinguished ideas, which appeal to "our most personal inner core" and draw men to higher ethical goals, from ideologies, which "grasp" and "seize" men and subordinate them to a singular program. See Patočka, "Ideology and Life in the Idea", in *Studia Phaenomenologica: Romanian Journal for Phenomenology* VII (2007), 90.

oneself"³⁴. Social life flourished when a generative historical community identified a new sense of purpose and responsibility by orienting itself toward the higher good, "awakening" from passivity to autonomy. Philosophy, he quoted Husserl as saying, prepared this transformation by "making possible humankind's development into personal autonomy and into an all-encompassing autonomy for humankind—the idea which represents the driving force of life for the highest stage of humanity"³⁵.

If these passages reveal the sweeping impact of Husserl's late work, the reader finds plenty of Heidegger as well. The analysis of *Dasein* as a being who confronted Being through practical engagement convinced Patočka. Yet he was not unalloyed in his praise, for he detected a lingering subjectivism even in the Freiburg magus, notably in the conception of *Dasein*. "Contra Heidegger", wrote Patočka in a manuscript from the early 1970s,

there is no primary projection of possibilities—the world is not a product of liberty but simply that which makes finite liberty possible. The world is the universal instance of the appearance, the plan of universal appearance ... I do not open my possibilities, but my situation in light of possibilities is disclosed.³⁶

Heidegger, like Husserl, overprivileged the subject by making the world dependent on *Dasein* for its disclosure. Patočka, by contrast, sought to pioneer an asubjective phenomenology of worldly manifestation³⁷.

ETHICS FOR A POST-EUROPEAN WORLD

"Europe has disappeared, probably forever", declared Patočka starkly in 1974. It was destroyed by a hyper-rationalism that had killed the spirit of open inquiry, fueled the project of overseas domination, and fired wars at home³⁸.

³⁴ Patočka, "Filosofie výchovy" in *Peče o Duší* Vol. I (Prague: Oikoymenh, 1996), 435. Cf. Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, 104.

³⁵ Originally quoted in Czech translation, the passage appears in Patočka, *Introduction*, 167.

³⁶ Patočka, "Leib, Möglichkeiten, Welt, Erscheinungsfeld", in *Vom Erscheinen als solchem*, Freiburg, Karl Alber, 2000, 92-3.

³⁷ For a fascinating analysis of the topic, see Karel Novotný, "L'ouverture du champ phénoménal: la donation ou l'interprétation? Sur le problème de l'apparaître comme tel chez Jan Patočka", in Hans Rainer Sepp and Ion Copoeru, eds., *Phenomenology 2005*, Part 2, 545-72.

³⁸ On Patočka's conception of Europe, see Gasché, *Europe*; Crépon, *Altérités de l'Europe*; Armin Homp and Markus Sedlaczek, *Jan Patočka und die Idee von Europa*, Berlin, MitOst e.V., 2003.

In the thaw before 1968's Prague Spring, he had already anticipated a dawning post-European age, in which new cultures and peoples would become the civilizational *avant garde*. Yet his devotion to Europe's fraught legacy was too great to simply write its epitaph. For by the 1970s, and despite a dour political outlook, Patočka advanced a desperate hope for European renewal, spearheaded by those who rose above the continent's recent catastrophes.

Patočka's striking philosophy of history, developed over several decades of a fecund seniority, served as backdrop for his phenomenology of human existence. Although the historical project remains less well-known than the phenomenology of world and man, the two itineraries were closely intertwined; in fact, the fear of European demise may have fueled his determination to articulate a redemptive phenomenology. Philosophy of history had attracted Patočka since young adulthood. In 1934, the 27-year-old declared that "history is incompatible with indifference"³⁹ because it concerned what it meant to be human, to be free but situated in the world. As the realm of anthropological self-comprehension, historical understanding was essential in helping men to avert humdrum routine in favor of "a new life" of liberty⁴⁰. A year later, he distinguished between a superficial history concerned with straight facts and a deep, philosophically-informed history that grasped the innate "ensemble of possibilities" forming each age⁴¹. Starting in the 1950s, leading into the heady days of Czechoslovak political reform, and culminating in the bitter 1970s, he cultivated these seeds into a verdant historical philosophy of truth and insight.

It was precisely world openness, Patočka asserted, that established Europe as a cultural and spiritual unity in ancient times, with Greek politics and philosophy its herald. The Greeks recognized world problematicity—the notion that the world is not a fixed presence but an open question—and celebrated human inquiry, establishing insight and responsibility as moral standards. This recognition, said Patočka, launched the historical age, for history was nothing else but the openness to being and the consequent questing for truth. "History arises", he wrote in 1976,

³⁹ Patočka, "Quelques Remarques sur les Concepts d'Histoire et d'Historiographie", in *L'Europe après L'Europe*, France, Verdier, 2007, 145.

⁴⁰ Patočka, "Quelques Remarques sur les Concepts d'Histoire et d'Historiographie", 150.

⁴¹ Patočka, "Quelques Remarques sur le Concept d'Histoire Universelle," in *L'Europe après l'Europe*, 155-71, 165. On Patočka's philosophy of history, see Ivan Chvatík, "Jan Patočka", in Aviezer Tucker, ed., *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, West Sussex, Blackwell, 2009, 518-28.

when people in a certain insignificant region of the earth cease to live for life and begin to live in order to conquer, for themselves and those who share their will, the space for their recognition, the space for freedom. That is politics in its original definition: life from freedom and for freedom.⁴²

Social life in prehistoric societies took the form of a great household, exhausting its members in labor for monarch and kin. Mythic societies formed an important transition from prehistory to history by lifting man's attention above the drudgery of life and fixing it beyond the world of things. But mythic peoples simply accepted external truths. By contrast, history began when man started to question previously accepted axioms and embrace the inherent change and problematicity of their world—chronologically, in ancient Greece with the joint birth of the polis and philosophy. The city-state demanded risk-taking men who moved beyond mere life-sustaining work—he credited Arendt with this insight—and into the realm of transcendent action and inquiry⁴³. “Nothing of the earlier life of acceptance remains in peace”, Patočka declared. “All the pillars of the community, traditions, and myths are equally shaken. ... In the moment when life renews itself, everything is cast in a new light”⁴⁴. Rejecting the “will to tradition”, the Greeks “reach[ed] forth” toward the “unsheltered life ... [toward] a world that opens itself” to action and quest⁴⁵.

Modernity, by contrast, at once affirmed human freedom as its highest ideal and enslaved men to objectivity. The modern West, according to Patočka, produced the first universal or meta-civilization [*nadcivilizace*], overcoming through rationalism the particularist religions of earlier epochs⁴⁶. Yet this ecumenism, which afforded Western civilization a worldwide reach, engendered sharp internal and external contradictions. For modern technocracy, by eroding cultural and religious allegiances, maintained a superficial moral hold on men and women. Recognizing the emotional shortcomings of a calculating ethos, modern rationalists of the revolutionary era embraced the liberalism of rights and virtues as a heroic bulwark against irrationalist retrenchment, an ally that

⁴² Patočka, “An Attempt at Czech National Philosophy and its Future”, in Milič Čapek and Karel Hrubý, eds., *T. G. Masaryk in Perspective: Comments and Criticism*, Ann Arbor, SVU Press, 1981, 1.

⁴³ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 15.

⁴⁴ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 39-40.

⁴⁵ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 35, 38, 39. On Patočka's wide-ranging appropriation of the Greeks, see Jean-Louis Poirier, “Patočka et le Grecs ou Philosophe au fond de la Carverne?” *Cahiers Philosophiques* 50 (1992), 167-200.

⁴⁶ Patočka, “La surcivilisation et son conflit interne”, 103-04.

could stir the passions where sober rationalism only piqued the intellect⁴⁷. But this was finally a partnership of convenience, forged to defend the "rights of rationality"⁴⁸. And like most opportunisms, the alliance could be broken.

Modern technical civilization took two forms in Patočka's eyes: an original, moderate, liberal technocracy and a radical response that rejected liberal pharisaism by pushing rationality to an extreme. In its moderate European mold, technocratic liberalism fostered a kind of "moral somnolence"⁴⁹, even nihilism, intensified by the increasingly heavy-handed scientific rationality that subordinated human life to objective forces. Rather than asserting their own spiritual potency, technocracies offered their members only an anodyne, agnostic faith that rejected particularism and banished the divine⁵⁰. Yet empty liberty and instrumental proceduralism could not feed the moral imagination or fuel the quest for wider meaning. As Patočka lamented in 1966, modern man had a natural and a scientific world but no longer an ethical one⁵¹. As a result, an atomized humanity faced a world voided of meaning⁵².

This spiritual contradiction was exacerbated by economic and political hypocrisy. In a startling reference from a 1950s essay on metacivilizational conflict, Patočka praised Marx and Lenin for their insights into modern society, despite the recent excesses of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia. The harrowing inequities of capitalism and the grave privation suffered by many across the planet were appalling injustices—imperatives that modern civilization seemed unable to redress despite its egalitarian promise and penchant for reform⁵³. Fatalism and anger came as little surprise. Nowhere was this brutal logic more apparent than under Western imperialism, which Patočka saw, again echoing Lenin, as a late nineteenth-century "crisis of expansion"⁵⁴ that transferred European inequities around the world⁵⁵. It was hard to imagine a more stark betrayal of the egalitarian norms of liberal rationalism than the brutal hierarchies of empire.

⁴⁷ Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 120, 141, 151.

⁴⁸ Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 150. One need only recall the Enlightenment preference for despots to note the absolutist temptation in rational reforms.

⁴⁹ Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 126.

⁵⁰ Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 163-64.

⁵¹ Patočka, "L'épique et le dramatique, l'épos et le drame", in *Studia Phaenomenologica*, 180.

⁵² Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 163-65.

⁵³ Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 156. Never anti-Marxist, Patočka occasionally embraced dialectic methods. In *Body, Community, Language, World*, 73, he even found dialectical thought lurking in Husserl.

⁵⁴ Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 133.

⁵⁵ Patočka, "Les fondements spirituels de la vie contemporaine" (1970s), in *Liberté et sacrifice*, 217.

These contradictions prompted a radical reaction *internal to* Western civilization, one that rejected liberal cant and pushed egalitarian rationality to the brink. But the grim ratiocinations of Jacobinism and Marxism—Patočka’s premier examples of metacivilizational radicalism—exacerbated rather than mitigated the central error of modernity, for they suppressed human morality in the name of mechanical control and planned dominion⁵⁶. Soviet communism marked the apotheosis of radical technocratic dominion. But ultimately both bourgeois and socialist—moderate and radical—brands of modernity evinced metacivilizational decline⁵⁷. The great clashes of Patočka’s day—World Wars I and II and the Cold War—were the dying spasms of a broken order, fought by alter egos. At their root lay an overweening rationalism that substituted scientific construction for the intuited real world and dissolved human responsibility into neutral forces, obscuring the human lifeworld⁵⁸. Universal rationalism, Patočka lamented in the early 1970s, turned the world into a “gigantic inorganic body”⁵⁹.

This danger, it should be noted, was not new; like Husserl’s rational *Urstiftung*, technocratic rationality was an ancient possibility that came to modern fruition. At its origins in the Greek polis, Europe cultivated an ethical responsibility for others and a soulful relation to being and truth. But the European *ratio* carried with it the impulse to domination and expansion as well—expressed potently in the *Imperium Romanum* but already evident in the Attican decline of Socrates’ day—that progressively reduced truth to mastery and worldiness to conquest. Technocratic enticements grew with the advent of Renaissance humanism, when rationalist subjectivism and technical instrumentalism were enlisted in the service of war. These mutations—from an ancient sense of *aletheia* as ontological openness to a modern controlling rationalism—impelled the tragic Western toward blind faith in technical science and turned humanity into clay for molding⁶⁰. Even Husserl was a sinner whose sub-

⁵⁶ Patočka, “La surcivilisation et son conflit interne”, 123, 126-29. Nazism was a different beast, a challenger to the challenger that aimed to discipline a slothful West and break Eastern radicalism. (149)

⁵⁷ Patočka, “La surcivilisation et son conflit interne”, 167. Note here a theme that would appear in Havel’s better-known essays: the similarity between Eastern totalitarianism and Western mass society.

⁵⁸ Patočka, “Réflexion sur l’Europe”, in *Liberté et sacrifice*, 184-5

⁵⁹ Patočka, “Europa und Nach-Europa: Die nacheuropäische Epoche und ihre geistigen Probleme”, in Patočka, *Ketzerische Essays zur Philosophie der Geschichte und ergänzende Schriften*, Klaus Nellen and Jiří Němec, eds., Vienna, Klett-Cotta, 1984, 217-18; Patočka, “La surcivilisation et son conflit interne”, 201-03.

⁶⁰ Patočka, “Die Epochen der Geschichte” in Patočka, *Ketzerische Essays*, 183-203.

jectivism swang too far inward in the effort to counter the objectivist threat⁶¹. Seeking to free phenomenology from the errors of its master, Patočka called for a new relation to the world and others, for the moral renewal of a modernity dulled by materialist indifference.

Continued Western "titanism" posed particular trouble for relations among peoples, because Europeans no longer understood cultural difference once they cast human interaction in a mechanical framework⁶². Understanding gave way to technical expedience, and European arrogance, subject-centered and supremely rational, widened the gulf with others⁶³. The failure of intercultural dialogue was inevitable, as others tried to preserve their traditions in the face of European hegemony, a cause for which Patočka felt some sympathy⁶⁴. In this regard, he made a strong distinction between the (originally European) principle of insight, which he would soon designate the care for the soul, and Europe as an (actual) geopolitical entity characterized by subject-centered rationality and a cult of dominance and superiority⁶⁵. Europe's noblest vision—the ideal of a society based on constant seeking after insight and responsibility—led a fugitive existence in the continent's actual history, regularly suppressed, often forgotten, occasionally renewed⁶⁶. The post-European world, Patočka hoped, might revive this legacy while rejecting its "decadent culture of subjectivism" and "over-technicization". For "[o]nly when post-European peoples understand not to fall back into the errors of Europe will they achieve the prospect of solving their problems"⁶⁷.

Patočka was not sanguine in believing that non-Westerners could resist the seductions of technology. Writing in the aftermath of the Prague Spring, he saw the history of socialism as a cautionary tale of how movements based on justified demands succumbed to the siren call of technocracy⁶⁸. Despite the mid-1960s hope that Czechoslovakia might birth a humane socialism, he came to

⁶¹ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 210-11.

⁶² Patočka, "La surcivilisation et son conflit interne", 169, 172, 175; "Réflexion sur l'Europe", 211. Tomáš Masaryk introduced the term *titanism* as a critique of modern moral subjectivism.

⁶³ Patočka, "Réflexion sur l'Europe", 197.

⁶⁴ Patočka, "Réflexion sur l'Europe", 212.

⁶⁵ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 211. On this theme, see Gasché.

⁶⁶ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 232.

⁶⁷ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 215, 218, 221. It is worth noting that Patočka's distinction of Europe from non-Western societies, while naïve and at times patronizing, was a far cry from Husserl's earlier description of Japan as a green branch of Occidental culture.

⁶⁸ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 218-19. See also Crépon, *Altérités de l'Europe*, Chpt. V (113-51) on the threats to the European idea.

see Marxism exhibiting the same technocratic fixity that poisoned modern rationality *tout court*; indeed, socialism intensified rational dominance in an effort to cure the ill of inequality⁶⁹. But more toxin had sickened, not healed the patient.

Yet neither was his hope for a renewal led by non-Europeans and based on the original Greek principle of insight entirely in vain⁷⁰. He appreciated the persistence of cultural variety across the globe despite Western hegemony, a resilience partly based in the strength of mythic cultures: If East Asian leaders such as Mao cloaked themselves in a Marxist mantle, he averred in a surprising reference, their vision was distinctly local, reaching back to a culture and mythology that European contact had never extinguished⁷¹. Non-Europeans, he anticipated, might learn to trust their customary moral (*sittliche*) resources, not simply resort to modern *Technik*⁷². For pre-rational mythologies, while phenomenologically naïve, provided an openness to transcendent being that could temper technocratic 'omniscience'⁷³. Indeed, it was ultimately a European conceit to believe in a single mankind united under the hegemony of reason.⁷⁴ Other peoples retained continuous religious and cultural worldviews, but only Europeans—since the days when Greeks disparaged barbarians—had insisted on measuring all men against themselves, on generalizing rather than particularizing their experience, on turning humans into objective data for invidious comparison⁷⁵.

But in the end, the ancient European principle of insight retained value as a human possibility, not simply as European property. For it could transcend the geographies of its birth and encourage others to cultivate their particular worlds, regardless of the violations committed in Europe's name⁷⁶. There were, in this sense, two Europes: a positive principle of insight available beyond the borders of the continent; and a negative history of domination associated with the continent's past and present. The latter Europe had destroyed itself; the former could be passed to someone else.

⁶⁹ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 223.

⁷⁰ He noted that Husserl's undertaking in the Crisis had a "capital importance" for the problems of post-European humanity. "Reflexion sur l'Europe", 181.

⁷¹ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 225.

⁷² Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 228, 230.

⁷³ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 232-38.

⁷⁴ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 226.

⁷⁵ Patočka, "Europa und Nach-Europa", 226, 230.

⁷⁶ Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 221.

LEANING OUT OF THE WORLD

What conditions might revive the ancient ideal in a fallen world? Patočka's final long work, *The Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, written in 1975 and treated today as a kind of *summa* of his thought, was his most apocalyptic, but it also attempted an answer to the question above that differed from the post-European renewal of an earlier decade⁷⁷. For in recalling Athenian achievement once again, Patočka discerned the possibility of a *European* renewal: Although a decadent life of unexamined complacency was more comfortable than anxious incertitude, it was moments of great terror, when all familiar meaning collapsed, that gave birth to politics and philosophy as domains of transcendent human action. For in the "shaken situation" of conflict or war—Patočka employed the Heraclitean term *polemos*—humans embraced "new possibilities of life" and accepted their role as free creators⁷⁸.

"History arises and can arise only insofar as there is *areté*, the excellence of humans who no longer simply live to live but who make room for their justification by looking into the nature of things and acting in harmony with what they see—by building a polis on the basis of the law of the world, which is *polemos*, by speaking that which they see as revealing itself to a free, exposed yet undaunted human (philosophy)"⁷⁹.

This dauntless history became the deep content—the terror and the hope—of Patočka's phenomenology, revealing the conditions of human conversion, or *metanoia*, in the "shaking of accepted meaning" and the "transcendence of humans toward the world, to the whole of what is brought to light"⁸⁰. Ecstatically, humans "lean out of the world" and must "call within and towards it"⁸¹. This *ekstasis* was not only, or perhaps even primarily, an individual act—a

⁷⁷ *The Heretical Essays* have attracted particular interest among Patočka scholars. The analyses of Ivan Chvatík remain touchstones: "The Heretical Conception of the European Legacy in the Late Essays of Jan Patočka", CTS-03-14 (2003); "Prolegomena to a Phenomenology of the Meaning of Human Life in the Late Essays of Jan Patočka", CTS-04-18 (2004); and "The Responsibility of the 'Shaken': Jan Patočka and his 'Care for the Soul' in a 'Post-European World'", CTS-09-06, all published as Working Papers of the Center for Theoretical Studies in Prague. See also Derrida's highly appropriative reading of the Fifth Heretical Essay in *The Gift of Death*.

⁷⁸ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 41.

⁷⁹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 43.

⁸⁰ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 75, 62, 46.

⁸¹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 115.

crucial challenge for those who would co-opt East European dissidents to the Western liberal program⁸².

It is not only individual life which, if it passes through the experience of the loss of meaning and if it derives from it the possibility and need for a wholly different self-relation to all that is, comes to a point of global "conversion". Perhaps the inmost nature of that rupture—which we sought to define as that which separates the pre-historic epoch from history proper—lies in that shaking of the naïve certainty which governs the life of humankind up to that specific transformation—and in a more profound sense really unitary—origin of politics and philosophy.⁸³

Modern rational science denied these ecstasies, individual and collective, transforming men from beings open to the world into a mere force for manipulation and control⁸⁴.

Patočka's *polemos*—the conflict or war that stood as the "law of the world"—and his celebration of the front-line experiences of Ernst Jünger and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin has discomfited some of his interpreters⁸⁵. In a benign reading, we could say that *polemos* characterized the constant turmoil of the world and the risky exposure of those who renounced comforting myths to struggle for truth. Yet this rendition is somewhat too easy, for Patočka also used it to characterize the European defensive battle against the non-European East that first gave rise to the ancient polis, an account that sullies the cultural expansiveness he displayed in earlier essays on the non-West. Perhaps the best we can say is that Patočka's attitude toward non-European culture was fraught. For if his defense of a European line reflected the common East Central European complaint that their homeland was occupied by less cultured Eastern hordes, it demands a certain understanding but hardly great sympathy.

The core of the *Heretical Essays* traced a "history of the soul"⁸⁶ from ancient Greece to the modern era, highlighting the struggle against decadent subservience to creaturely life. Here Patočka's exemplar was Socrates, whose maieutic questing was appropriated and revised by phenomenology as the eidetic

⁸² Reaganites preferred to see dissidents as freedom fighters advocating Western liberalism and ignore their warnings about the technocratic similarities between West and East.

⁸³ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 61.

⁸⁴ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 116.

⁸⁵ See in particular Erazim Kohák and Aviezer Tucker. As usual with Patočka, the transmission of the Heraclitean *polemos* likely came through Heidegger.

⁸⁶ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 103.

method essential to problematizing the world and cultivating responsibility. Yet Socrates lived—and, more germane, died—at a moment when the Greek polis was strife-ridden and failing. The Hellenism that replaced it spread Greek idols across Eurasia (a project furthered by the Romans), demonstrating a schism at the heart of the Attican experience. While the Mediterranean empires fostered a spiritual impulse, their unity took the form of political domination, and the loyalty they demanded was no longer that of free citizens to an ideal good but of subjects to a positive state embodying good on earth. The Athenian *epimeleia tēs psūches* [care for the soul] slipped into the duality of subjective domination and objective subservience. And while latter-day neo-Platonism preserved a human relation to the *mysterium*, it also set the stage for the progressive removal of goodness and responsibility from the human realm. Christianity cinched this departure. If on the one hand, Christian care called the soul to higher responsibility, it also cast the source of goodness wholly outside of the world and, in turn, threw the individual back on himself as individual, rather than as a citizen realizing the good through worldly social responsibility. Indeed, the world itself and the society of men were denigrated as temptations drawing one from divine regard. But as Husserl and Heidegger, so Patočka: it was only in the modern age that this dialectic utterly gave way to dominance. Modern technoscience, for all its achievements, inaugurated an age of meaninglessness, when man grew “estranged from any personal and moral vocation”.⁸⁷ A “cult of the mechanical” replaced care for the soul, and man became a *force majeure*, not a free moral agent, savagely deployed in two world wars where Europe died along with its millions.

Yet Patočka found a desperate glimmer in this battlefield demise. For the loss of all sense, the devastation of life and thought, shook some bold people from torpor and led them to protest the rule of death and join in the effort to renew man’s ethical vocation. This “solidarity of the shaken [*solidarita otřesených*]” allowed some men to understand “what life and death are all about”⁸⁸. And here Patočka’s narrative returned to its start. For the modern age, in effect, threw men back into pre-history, into a situation in which truths were externally imposed and man accepted alien forces rather than embrace

⁸⁷ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 111.

⁸⁸ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 134-36.

his true vocation to question and co-create the world. History had ceased, but it might yet start again. And phenomenology became an agent of this renewal, a new philosophy of “living in truth [žít v pravdě]”, to invoke Patočka’s formula that Havel later made famous⁸⁹. As in ancient times, humanity needed a renaissance of truth and meaning. This renewal would come from men prepared to face the open world and sacrifice themselves in the name of a higher good—the final expression of freedom from the tyranny of life and death and a rejection of the status of object. The act of sacrifice could shake others as well, bringing them face to face with human freedom and possibility. Only sacrifice could re-launch history by rededicating men to “the shaken certitude of pre-given meaning”⁹⁰. Writing in a nominally Marxist wasteland, Patočka turned Marx and Hegel on their heads: rather than the end of history, he called for history’s return.

CONCLUSION

“We always take hold of liberty, wrote a young Patočka in 1934, “in a historical situation, while becoming what we are, unshakable, stronger than the world; by the act of making a decision, the human exceeds the world without leaving it”⁹¹. In 1977, after a career thwarted by Czechoslovakia’s praetorian guards, he made a fatal decision to defend human rights against a regime that preached justice and practiced violence. Their invocation stood in some tension to his open-ended advocacy of freedom, for a commitment to the new human rights “utopia”, with its minimalist but fixed metaphysics of human essence, seemed to limit transcendental problematicity⁹². Or perhaps the tension comes with our current understanding of rights, for Patočka may have meant nothing more by adopting the term than the defense of a negative metaphysical openness, whereas we understand the assertion of a particular liberal program. At any rate, if the letter of human rights law ill-accorded an open metaphysics, the act of protest surely fit Patočka’s philosophy in spirit: Among a community of

⁸⁹ Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 26.

⁹⁰ Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, 118.

⁹¹ Patočka, “Quelques Remarques sur les Concepts d’Histoire et d’Historiographie”, 152.

⁹² On human rights as a utopia, see Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Cambridge: Harvard, 2010.

dissidents determined to resist the abasement of their fellows, he sacrificed his safety to prompt a moral response among citizens, acknowledging by his example that humans might transcend any historical hour.