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Editors

Contributions to Phenomenology 61

Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology

Centenary Papers



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JAN PATOČKA AND THE HERITAGE OF PHENOMENOLOGY

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Centenary Papers

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Editors' Introduction

Jan Patočka, a respected name in Continental philosophy, though less well-known in the English-speaking world, was, with Eugen Fink and Ludwig Landgrebe, one of the key figures in the small, yet – for the phenomenological movement – extremely important group of Edmund Husserl's last direct pupils. He met Husserl for the first time in Paris, where he spent the entire schoolyear 1928–1929 on a graduate scholarship and had the fortunate opportunity to attend, at the Sorbonne, the *Pariser Vorträge* (better known under the title of *Cartesian Meditations*), fascinated, in his own words, “to see this meditation unfold, impervious to the public eye, as if the philosopher were himself at Descartes' hearth, further developing his themes.” When he subsequently won a Humboldt-Foundation stipend, it was clear that, far from staying in Berlin where he had been assigned, he would let nothing keep him from rejoining Husserl in Freiburg. The old master greeted him warmly as a fellow countryman – Husserl's native Prostějov (Prossnitz) was and still is part of the same country as Turnov, where Patočka was born in 1907, or Prague, where he was to live out his life. As a matter of fact, he was at the time the one and only countryman of Husserl's to show a serious interest in phenomenology.

The impressions and experiences from the months the young Patočka spent in Germany, in 1932–1933, were without a doubt decisive for the future path of his thought. In Berlin, he not only witnessed Hitler's *coup d'état* (a shock he was later to speak of as the beginning of his political awakening), but engaged in a fruitful friendship with Jacob Klein (the reader will find in the following pages a detailed account of the importance of this relation for Patočka's understanding of Plato, and one could say the same for Aristotle). Klein was also instrumental in recommending insistently that Patočka not concentrate solely on the study of Husserl's phenomenology, but apply equal attention to the thinking of his one-time assistant Martin Heidegger – despite Heidegger's later severe criticism of Husserl and his eminently criticizable political stance. Patočka was given the same advice by Husserl's then assistant, Eugen Fink. In Freiburg, where he was an eye-witness to Heidegger's infamous Nazi rectorship of the university, Patočka was also initiated, with the help of Fink, his elder by a mere two years, into the deepest of philosophical issues which – as he was already then beginning to understand – lay hidden in the gaping abyss between Husserl's phenomenology and what Heidegger had made out of it. To delve into these obscure depths or, eventually, to bridge the gap – such

was the task Patočka appears to have taken up even then. And, as the reader will see while following the many different paths along which the contributors to this volume explore and probe into his thought, he will perhaps have succeeded at least in indicating that this in-between is indeed the space worth diving into, if one is to come closer “to things themselves” than Husserl himself ever managed and let phenomena shine forth at once in their apparentness and their historicity, consistently grasped and interpreted as a matter, not only of the “history of Being,” but, to no less an extent, of that of mankind.

Patočka's experience with the dramatic and tragic times in which his destiny placed him was quite clearly of primary importance for his succeeding in linking phenomenological questions and questioning with the field of the philosophy of history, as well as in his later becoming himself a pivotal figure in contemporary Czech history. To get back to the 1930s, at the time when he was writing the habilitation thesis he was to publish in 1936 on the Husserlian theme of the life-world (*The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*), Patočka was instrumental in organizing the visit to Prague during which Husserl presented, in November 1935, one of the first drafts of his posthumously published work *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Shortly thereafter, when it became clear that Nazi authorities were not willing to allow Husserl and his assistants to work undisturbed on the transcribing and editing of his manuscripts in Germany, Patočka endeavored to secure their transfer to Czechoslovakia. Ludwig Landgrebe was thus able to prepare the first volume of the proposed Collected Works of Edmund Husserl (*Erfahrung und Urteil*), but when the book came off the press in Prague, in March 1939, Hitler's troops were already marching into town. Nearly the whole edition was destroyed by the Nazi occupiers who, eight months later, also closed all Czech universities for the duration of the war. During the Occupation years, Patočka lived as a secondary school teacher and was later mobilized as a laborer, while never ceasing to work simultaneously on several ambitious philosophical projects (among them, already, a philosophy of history). All remained unfinished at the end of the war, when their author chose rather to invest his energy into his teaching at Charles University. During the short interlude of freedom before the February 1948 “Prague coup” ushered in yet another – this time Stalinistic Communist – totalitarian regime and Patočka was forced out of academe, he lectured mainly on the history of philosophy, with courses on the Pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He was to wait twenty years – sidelined into editing the work of the great late Renaissance philosopher Comenius, and becoming by the way a leading figure of world Comeniology – before being called back to Charles University thanks to the political liberalization of the so-called Prague Spring. In the meantime, he had published in 1964 his second and last book to appear in a normal way: the collection of essays on *Aristotle, his Forerunners and Successors*, for which he was awarded the highest postdoctoral degree of the Academy of Sciences. (A third slender volume – the collection of more politically-minded essays *For the Meaning of Today* – was to be printed in 1969, then censored and pulped before it ever got to the bookshops.) With widening publishing possibilities at home and abroad in the second half of the 1960s, Patočka also continued working on the original revision of phenomenology

dealt with in Part II of this volume. These reflections nourished his teaching when, at age 61, he was finally awarded tenure as professor at Charles University. His appointment was, however, officialized only in the autumn of 1968, i.e., over two months *after* Czechoslovakia had once again been occupied – by the armed forces of its Warsaw Pact allies. After a mere four years of teaching, Jan Patočka was forcefully pensioned on reaching age 65, left with only a, so to speak, private engagement with the participants of the half-illegal seminars held in his own apartment or at the homes of students, friends and well-wishers. In the darkest days of the 1970s “normalization” period he nonetheless kept working, as he wrote to a French friend in 1975, “harder than ever” on his main subjects. His last and most translated major work, the *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, was published in a totally illegal samizdat edition less than two years before his life reached its climax and end, when – following through with the ideas of freedom and responsibility which draw an unbroken line of force through forty years’ thinking, teaching, and writing – he became, alongside future Czech President Václav Havel, one of the three initial spokespersons for the dissident civic initiative movement Charter 77.

*

This volume is a collection of papers presented in Prague at a conference held in April 2007, conjointly by Charles University and the Czech Academy of Sciences, to commemorate the centenary of Patočka’s birth and the thirtieth anniversary of his death. Scholars from around the world assembled then in the Czech capital to explore the significance of Patočka’s writings for contemporary philosophy. The conference showed that Jan Patočka’s many-faceted thoughtful legacy has truly something to say to the world at large, and that the way in which it addresses basic questions of human existence in general, and the condition of modern man in particular, remains acutely actual.

From the thirty contributions presented at the conference (the complete proceedings of which are scheduled to appear simultaneously in Czech translation)¹ we have attempted to select a smaller number covering, in as broad a spectrum as possible, the whole of Patočka’s work. The authors represented here include both scholars and politicians, philosophers and sociologists, Patočka’s direct disciples and fellow dissidents as well as younger people with backgrounds stemming from or bridging fifteen different countries and five continents (the Old World coming together with the New and the still newer “post-European world” dealt with in some of Patočka’s last important texts). Although no predefined guidelines were given to the participants, their contributions divide up naturally into three large transthematic fields defining the articulation of the final selection which is reflected in vignette form in Václav Havel’s opening speech, chosen to serve as preface.

¹ Ivan CHVÁTÍK (ed.), *Myšlení Jana Patočky očima dnešní filosofie* [The Thought of Jan Patočka in the Eyes of Philosophy Today] (Praha: OIKOYMENH/FILOSOFIA, 2010).

In Part I, the reader will thus find papers mapping out Patočka's rootedness in philosophy's near and distant past: above all his dialogue with the thought and methods developed by his immediate predecessors, Husserl and Heidegger, but also the constant reflection on Plato (and, between the lines, Aristotle and Kant) which is never solely exegetical, drawing rather on the history of philosophy in order to revisit and go beyond classical phenomenology while grappling already in the 1950s with some of the same extremely contemporary problems with which French phenomenologists in particular (Levinas, Ricœur, Derrida, Marion) have been and remain concerned up through the present day. The four texts assembled here draw the major lines of force which point to Part II, defined by the two poles of negative Platonism and asubjective phenomenology (in what one could call, with Ricœur in 1997, an elliptical movement, overlapping with that he himself discerned in Patočka's life work between the phenomenology of the natural world and the question of the meaning of history). We have placed here the contributions dealing more specifically with Patočka's revisited concept of phenomenology and the ways in which it inspires today's philosophers, in such varied domains as cognitive science, the theory of translation, or phenomenological sociology. The third and final section (sharing – next to politics, history, ethics, and religion – part of its title with the 2007 special issue of the Romanian journal *Studia phaenomenologica*, entirely devoted to Patočka, which set the stage for the Prague conference) proves that Patočka never lost sight of what he formulated as early as the first half of the 1930s, namely, that philosophy is not merely one more specialized discipline among others, but something entirely different: “Among human possibilities is the capacity to know *the world* (not individual things, but ‘the whole’),”² in which we human beings exist as “thrown freedom”: “all the possibilities of freedom spring out of that in which we are placed by mankind's past, all are codetermined by what has been.”³ That is to say that philosophy cannot afford to concentrate exclusively on highly abstract “ontological” research; its task is, on the contrary, to attempt to understand what human freedom and history are all about. “Understanding our freedom means” – of course – “grasping it in a historical situation.”⁴ In short,

... what, in the last instance, philosophy calls for is a heroic man. That is philosophy's human message. Heroism is not a blind passion, love or revenge, ambition or will to power. Rather, it implies a calm clarity concerning the whole of life, an awareness that this way of acting is *for me* a necessity, the sole possible way for me to exist in the world. The hero's being in the world, here and now, does not await its confirmation and continuation in a world beyond. Heroism accepts its own finitude. It is nothing other than the conclusive

²Jan Patočka, “Some Comments concerning the Extramundane and Mundane Position of Philosophy” [1934], in *Living in Problematicity*, ed. E. Manton, transl. E. Kohák and E. Manton (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2007), p. 19.

³Jan Patočka, “Několik poznámek k pojmům dějin a dějepisu” [1934], in *Sebrané spisy*, sv. 1, *Péče o duši I*, ed. I. Chvatík and P. Kouba (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 1996), pp. 43–44; see French translation: “Quelques remarques sur les concepts d'histoire et d'historiographie,” in *L'Europe après l'Europe*, ed. and transl. E. Abrams (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2007), p. 151.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 44/152 (Czech/French).

certifying of its own substance, irreducible to the mere circumstances of the world's cross-roads. Philosophy can then cleanse the heroic man's self-understanding, make him comprehend his faith, not as the revelation of something transcendent, but as a free human act. What appears in this faith is no transcendent divine commandment, but the principle of man standing in a historical situation. The understanding of Being which philosophy arrives at when intellectually exceeding the world is thus linked with man's authentic existence as represented by the free act; so we might, perhaps, express the ideal of a consummate philosophy as that of a philosophy of heroism and a heroism of philosophy.⁵

So the lines of force drawn through the first two sections lead logically into the third and find there their climax, be it in scholars' and politicians' reflections on Patočka's personal engagement in politics and his death, be it in his project of philosophy of history, his concept of religion, or the (at first glance) more marginal excursions evoking the significance of his thought for comparative analysis of civilizations or intercultural dialogue. Their thematic criss-crossing is summed up in the final contribution (fruit of a talk given two years after the Prague conference, by its organizer, at an international seminar on "Europe after Europe" at the University of Bergamo, Italy) which draws a parallel between the Socratic questioning at the heart of the "care for the soul" and the generalization of the epoché advocated by Patočka's asubjectivism in the perspective of a "third (ethical) conversion" continuing the universal history of the European world in the philosophical sense which was the direct or indirect ambition of such an important part of his work from the 1930s onward and leaving the last word to a new profound reading of the "solidarity of the shaken" – an albeit negative point of reference in the current spiritual disarray of world-forsaken "globalized" humanity.

The volume as a whole, meant to be a both overall and in-depth introduction for English-speakers, remains of interest to all Patočka scholars, whatever their linguistic allegiance, enabling laymen and specialists alike to better appreciate Patočka's own irreplaceable part in the heritage of phenomenology and his positive message for us today.

*

A few technical remarks:

The editorial work on this volume, with its contributions from scholars of eleven different mother tongues quoting Patočka from available English, French, or German translations, when not translating themselves from the original Czech, German, or French documents, has involved checking all cited passages against sources available in the Prague Jan Patočka Archive. The aim was initially simply to ensure coherence, but the enterprise has enabled us to correct several mistaken readings and, by the way, to suggest perhaps a few modest solutions in terminological questions that have so far divided Patočka's various English translators. The quotations in the following pages do not, therefore, always follow word for word the indicated sources. The reader tempted by the idea (or, shall we say, the by no

⁵ Jan Patočka, "Some Comments concerning the Extramundane...", *op. cit.*, pp. 27–28.

means superfluous precaution) of comparing translations will find at the end of the volume a bibliography of the works by Patočka quoted in the following pages with references to the Czech (German or French) original documents, as well as to translations available in five major world languages. The complete bibliography, including an up-to-date list of secondary literature, can be consulted at the Internet address of the Archive in Prague: <http://www.ajp.cuni.cz/biblio.html>.

Finally, the editors wish to express heartfelt thanks to RPG Advisors (Czech Republic), the Simons Foundation (Vancouver), the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (Paris), the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, the Jan Hus Association (Paris), and the Deutsch-Tschechischer Zukunftsfond for their generous support, without which the centenary conference in Prague would not have been possible.

Remembering Jan Patočka

Opening Speech at the Conference in Prague, April 23, 2007

Václav Havel

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are surely not expecting an expert lecture from me. By way of introduction to this significant and important conference, which I welcome in Prague, I would like to make just three or four personal remarks.

My first contact with the work of Professor Patočka was in the depths of the darkest 1950s when, as a boy of about fifteen, thanks to a bit of detective work, I found out the existence of a book entitled *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*. The book was in the University library but it was banned and, therefore, not lent out. At the time banned books could be borrowed on an individual basis with the agreement of a man named Jirkovský. I got up the courage to go and plead with him, and fortunately succeeded in being convincing. I read *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem* which – along with one or two other books – proved to be instrumental in shaping my life. This book is what made me realize that my own life should be seen in the framework of the natural world, and that this world, with its dimensions of near and far, up and down, its horizon and its mystery, is something entirely apart from what science has to offer. A small example: the natural world is what makes the cosmos appear as incomprehensibly immense. It does not necessarily seem so to astronomers. They measure it in parsecs and observe merely objective nearness and farness. Astronomy's calling is not, however, to marvel at mystery, but rather to keep on researching so as to accumulate more and more knowledge.

My second remark concerns the 1960s. By that time I already knew Professor Patočka personally and I invited him to the theater I was working at. He held philosophical lectures, debates, and discussions for us in the evening after the performances. He was an enthralling debater, an oral, Socratic type of philosopher, and his lectures were so gripping that even the actors never walked out on him.

V. Havel (✉)

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