

Nothingness and Responsibility

The Problem of “Negative Platonism” in Patočka’s Philosophy [1990]

Not only philosophy, but also science, in Patočka’s opinion, must take interest in what is given. It is necessary not only to see, what is, but also to understand, what we are to do, if our acts and activities (including our thinking) have to make sense. Consequently, we must not reduce human responsibility to a mere moral problem in a narrow sense. Every human being is responsible in a particular situation which means a challenge for us, of course an articulated one. Patočka speaks of a “basic debt of an individual to the situation he lives in”; he emphasises that “it is utopianism, naive subjectivism, and moral insensibility” to ask for a right to a situation which we should wish, and which would be advantageous for us. We must start from a situation, as it is, with its different disfavours and injustices, but, of course, not to accept them, but not to run away from them. Our spiritual life is always mediated through the society we live in, the society which itself depends upon the situation in the present-day world and upon the heritage of its own past. This may be denoted as our debt. The debt is a loan which enables us to manage our own things, it is a free relationship. Such a situation in itself is a challenge which we have not created, but which we must bear and with which we must put up. On the basis of this view, Patočka criticises our great historian Pekař. In Patočka’s opinion, Pekař did a lot, but “he said nothing as to the question what to do now, once we are in this situation, so tang desired and so risky” (i. e. in the situation of a new democratic state after the World War I). On the other hand, Patočka mentions Rádl who “centred all his activities on the analysis of the moral state of the Republic from the viewpoint of deed – not what actually was, but what should be done”. Patočka then characterizes this type of approach as adequate to the Masaryk’s one.

So, we can see that responsibility must not be restricted to a mere reaction to the factual aspect of the given situation. Every description of the situation and its structure reckons with its three members or constituents: first, with the given subject as a focus or centre of that part of the world which surrounds it, secondly, with the given circumstances and, [37] thirdly, with the activities of the given subject based on its ability to be active, to interfere and change the situation. If Patočka speaks of “the analysis of the moral state of the republic from the viewpoint of deed”, then this must be understood as an analysis of the given factual components of the situation from the viewpoint of its members or constituents non-given, which represent a fourth member or constituent. In accordance with this, we must also distinguish between two different components of the human ability of acting, interfering and changing the situation. The first is represented by the given factual ability, based on physical condition, experience and knowledge of man. But he is also capable of inventing entirely new ways of reacting and of activities which cannot be derived from the given circumstances nor from any “outfit” or “equipment”, either physical or mental. The other component is indeed unforeseeable, but it is not really contingent, as it is deeply linked

up with factual reality; nevertheless, it is superior to it and based essentially on the human being's freedom. Every free act is based essentially on the free response of a particular man to a non-given challenge, to a non-given "calling" or "appeal" of something that does not yet exist, is not yet real, no "*res*", no existing "thing". Modern man understood such a "no-thing" as simply "nothing" (which is quite clear in English). Patočka does not agree with this philosophically unacceptable custom. His approach, however, cannot be denoted as postmodern as in reality it is post-postmodern.

Let us briefly follow the main motives of his ideas. As one of the last but not least disciples of Husserl, Patočka started as a phenomenologist. He was opposed to traditional metaphysics which – in his words in *Natural World* – wants to depart from the objective (or better to say objectified – H.) reality but does not realize that "the sense of objects from which it departs" presupposes subjective tendencies which indicate the direction and criteria of the metaphysical approach to problems. The new grasp of metaphysics as a genuine philosophy as a theory of constitution is said to enable us to newly formulate the main tasks of philosophy, completely differing from the goals of objectivistic ontology. Then, Patočka mentions a creation of universal history comprising not only history of man, "but of all creatures". According to Patočka's pre-war views, this must be understood as an interpretation of all activities in the world on the basis of fundamental structures of possible subjectivity. Under a certain influence of Henri Bergson, Patočka uses the title of Bergson's famous work *Creative evolution* when he wants to characterize this "historization of the Universe" (it is interesting that Patočka came back to Bergson's ideas in the 1950's when he discussed the problems of "negative Platonism"). This formulation by Patočka [38] should be understood in the sense that the law of experience is searched for in the subject itself, the law that "gives rise to reality in all its forms, in all diversity of its phenomena". Patočka tells us in this first period that the world and its unity are formed and preserved by the spirit, by inner forces, through which acts can exclusively be performed as well as problems solved.

In the same year as his habilitation thesis appeared, Patočka published his article on the double conception of the meaning and goal of philosophy where he identified "the basis of all being" with the "supreme value" and interpreted both as "something intrinsic, something belonging to our life". He speaks of the "stream of the spirit" and expresses the following idea of his: "The climax of this whole stream of the spirit would be perhaps a theory of autonomous life which itself from its own sovereignty presents its tasks, settles values and laws." Patočka's minor comment seems to have special importance: in the framework of this conception allegedly no function would be "quite superior to others" and, therefore, there would be "no supremacy of intellectual activities over others, there exist rather a co-ordination". In Patočka's opinion, this autonomous life is "godhood fighting against its own inner danger".

After the war, we discover in Patočka's thinking a fundamental change which was never commented on by himself. This second period was influenced by reading Sartre (*Being and*

Nothingness), which probably – through a contrast – opened up for Patočka a new view of Heidegger and his conception of nothingness in its relation to Being. On the other hand, we can see Plato's remarkable influence on Patočka's philosophy during the first three post-war years, i. e., in that short period when Patočka could lecture again at the university which had been closed both to professors and students during the World War II. Patočka started his lectures with pre-Socratics, continued with Socrates and Plato, and – after February 1948 – he could only start with Aristotle. When he was dismissed from the university, he started to work out a new philosophical approach to problems in a certain confrontation with Platonic thought, replacing “positive” Platonism with what Patočka used to call “negative Platonism”. (At that time, Patočka comes back again to Bergson's conception of negativity and nothingness.) His main idea consists in emphasizing non-objectivity as against objectivity (terminologically more suitable way would be to say non-objectivity as against objectivizations), and also in the terminological grasp of a special kind of non-being as profoundly important vis-a-vis any being. Even almost two decades later – surely affected by the continuing personal and historical “negative” experiences (and also under a certain influence of Masaryk's and Rádl's thinking) – Patočka still [39] underlines special importance of what is not “objective” – or “like an object” – and what really “is not” any being, “*ens*”. He does so in such a way which seems to me to surpass certain taboos of the phenomenological tradition, especially as regards the way of understanding the “world” (natural world, world of our life). Many symptoms, however, seem to suggest that other transformations have taken place in Patočka's thinking, though he did not elaborate any new project or draft of a systematic whole, let alone start its upbuilding. I think that he was inhibited not only by the remnants of old metaphysics in his thinking, but also by his phenomenological roots in proceeding a few more steps in this direction. But the ideas that were not elaborated in such a systematic manner by Patočka may be here and there discovered in the form of less striking formulations in very different politically topical contexts precisely in Patočka's last period of life.

Let us return to the 1950's and to Patočka's “negative Platonism”. He then spoke of metaphysical philosophy based on a significant distinction – Patočka speaks of a “philosophy of distinction” –, distinction between objectivity and non-objectivity. This distinction is primarily important for two main subjects – whole (or totality) and the truth. We shall restrict ourselves to the first one. In Patočka's view, “genuinely objectively it is not possible to arrive at a real whole anywhere” (equally as to a totality of everything which is being, i. e. all particular wholes). In his lecture in April 1975, Patočka said even fifteen years later: “The world tells us something at each moment: our action is nothing else than a response to what the world tells us. That things have significance for us, that they appeal to us for something and that we answer them.” And here is a certain negativity. In the preceding, second period, i. e. in the 1950's, Patočka speaks of “nothingness” as a necessary term with “which an idea clashes as soon as it is not satisfied with the positive and given”. The positive and given is – in a certain sense – “too narrow” to us, says

Patočka. "But we cannot be satisfied with the given if we are to achieve a whole. The whole then assumes not only being things, realities, but a transcensus of being things without denying them. This transcensus without denial is, however, necessarily a transcensus to non-being as all being is included into the transcended. Nothingness is dissatisfaction in the middle of the given being, a postulate of the non-given."

Patočka's texts on "negative Platonism", written during the 1950's and never published throughout his life (only some of them appeared in samizdat), appear to me as a most inspiring attempt at a systematic solution of the great problems of the traditional philosophy in a non-metaphysical manner, or in other words, on the path of a "new [40] metaphysics". One of these problems must be also freedom and human responsibility. Patočka does not see in Plato "a genuine proper fulfilment of the plan of metaphysical philosophy" (this he reserves for Aristotle only). He sees that, in Plato, "the metaphysical problem has not yet been completely solved". For this very reason there is in Plato "more than Plato".

The same can be said about Patočka. The most inspiring are the philosophical problems that have not been solved and that remained open. Let us survey very briefly and with necessary simplification the fundamental features of the idea of "negative Platonism". Every non-metaphysical understanding of ideas must abandon taking them for given beings but lets them "work" as "something" that "is to be", but without reducing them to mere subjectivity and without deducing them from any given beings. In Plato's *Timaeus* we could also speak in a certain sense of the demiurge's responsibility. He is responsible for creating the world according to paradigmatic ideas. He is responsible before them, i. e. in facing them as well as being responsible for them. But in that case, we must primarily replace ideas as eternal beings by ideas that are still non-being appeals which must be first heard or seen, then understood or formulated but, in particular, followed and fulfilled. Then we must replace the demiurge by man, i. e. by ourselves. Man is to bring new realities to the real world or repair the already existing things according to "negative", i. e. non-existing ideas which appeal to him personally and in his particular situation as challenges. Unlike the demiurge, man is never confronted only with ideas but also with hard facts and with solidifying and long-lasting trends. Therefore, man's responsibility is much more complicated than any demiurge's because, as he lives by facing non-existing ideas and their particular challenges, he is at the same time responsible for his fellow-people but also before them and facing them. This is his social, political, and also moral responsibility. Any of his fellow men again is responsible also for him and before him, but basically and primarily before the non-existing ideas challenging him personally, may be in some different direction, as precisely his own situation is also specific and different from the situation of other people. And if we want to continue and deduce the results surpassing the framework of possible human activities, we must realize that even extremely diverse under-human beings perform their own responsibilities and keep the world going by criteria or norm which cannot be understood as "being" or "existing" but

which must be conceived as “valid”, i. e. as no-things (not nothing!) which “are to be”, which are to be applied, realized.

As can be seen, I understand Patočka’s initiative with which he [41] speculated on the possibility of negative Platonism as a remarkable challenge to all of us and as possible basis of our philosophical responsibility. The problem of non-objective “reality” which we must not understand as a “thing”, “*res*”, leads us to a new way of thinking over the “things” which really are not any things (real objects) at all. If we approach this critically, we must abandon the objectifying manners of thinking which do not allow to respect that fundamental distinction in Patočka’s sense. We are standing before a challenge to start the first steps in elaborating a new type of non-objectifying, but still conceptual thinking based perhaps on a better understanding of what responsibility is indeed.

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