Philosophy as Dissent: The Last Days of Jan Patočka
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University of Alberta, Augustana Campus Faculty Colloquium
Presented on March 29, 2010

Abstract: Under the Nazi and Soviet occupations of Czechoslovakia, Jan Patočka practiced philosophy under official censorship and in secret. He held his seminars in private and his books were distributed in samizdat form, until he signed Charta 77 and became one of the spokespersons of the dissident movement. As a result of his shift from the philosophy of history to acting in history and of his passage from a limited audience to a wide public for his acts of dissent, Patočka was arrested and died in the course of long and repeated police interrogations.

It is not altogether uncommon to link together philosophy and dissent. Rarely however have philosophers risked their lives for the values and truths they sought to express. The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, who died in 1977 of a brain haemorrhage he suffered while in police custody, is an example of how philosophy can lead to dissent, such as that of the Charter 77 movement, and even become a form of dissent. Throughout this interrogation of Patočka’s work, I will also be relating his practice of philosophy to the conditions, defined by two totalitarian regimes, under which this practice took place (all this on the screen behind me).

I. The Aftermath of the German Occupation

Through his study of the phenomenological movement and of the history of philosophy, Patočka developed a practical understanding of philosophy that situates it in the world, without belonging to the political order. In a text titled “Of Two Manners to Conceive of the Meaning of Philosophy,” published in 1936, he argues that it matters little whether or not philosophy is an attempt to act on society or is simply an exercise each must take on for themselves. Philosophy conceived in a heterocentric manner – focused on its effects on others and on society – has lesser effects than it imagines, and what’s more, it rests on a magical understanding of ideas. Indeed, a philosophy that attempts to reach the world and influence it, is powerless on its own; it must then
become ideological, it must be taken on by a “vital orientation” in society, be it religious, political or personal; it must enter into a pre-existing struggle between such orientations. Those who attempt to bring their philosophy in line with these vital orientations, or take on those of others, even if they had no such intentions for their own thought, expect that a philosophy can magically answer the question of the destiny of individuals, of a nation, or of humanity. As a result, this magical action of philosophy is impossible to predict and often transforms it entirely.

However, the other meaning of philosophy – the meaning Patočka sees in it as a form of “care for the soul” – does not present lesser difficulties. Even conceived in an autocentric manner, without any outward social function, philosophy retains an operative action, one it accomplishes through the attempt of an individual philosopher at grasping an existence within the world. This action is aperceptive: it frames how we perceive the world, it defines the words we use, it gives meaning to the images we see – it makes up our representation of the world. Philosophy, over long periods of time, contributes to shape our habits: it is part of the atmosphere of our lives. No matter how they understand philosophy, philosophers do not entirely master the consequences of their thought.

Under the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, Patočka began to develop a philosophical approach to politics; and immediately after the war, he published an article entitled “Ideology and Life in the Idea” where he made explicit this difference between philosophy and other forms of thinking, such as political ideologies. The question behind this article, which Patočka published in 1946, emerged from the legacy of the German occupation and the need to

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reflect on its experience, but also from the close presence of the U.S.S.R. and the importance of
the communist ideology in Czechoslovakia.

Patočka outlines three related elements that must nonetheless be distinguished from one
another: ideas, conceptions, and ideologies. A conception is a theory that allows us to grasp part
of reality, while admitting the presence of other theories, and without engaging us to choose it
over the others. Conceptions are external to us and can be taken on to give meaning to our
experiences, based on our theoretical needs. When a conception engages us to choose it over any
other, it becomes an ideology. Ideology, Patočka writes, “accommodates those of our tendencies,
needs, and forces which lay dormant in us, so as to lead, direct, and draw them together for the
needs of social action.” As such, it grabs us from the outside and it remains external to us, all
the while binding us as one of the forces it can use – but only as a force. For ideologies, for the
leaders of ideological movements, we are nothing but forces, nothing but bodies to be put to
work. Ideologies are entirely technical in the twentieth century: they show human beings not as
persons, and societies not as groups of human beings, but both appear only as technical problems
to be resolved. According to this technical logic, each person can then be convinced by
propaganda that he or she is freely joining a cause, and those who cannot, will simply have to be
discarded, eliminated or neutralized because of their uselessness or the danger they represent.

Yet there is another type of theory: the idea, which cannot remain external to us. Ideas are
embodied: they call us to them, so that we may live inside them, they are only meaningful
insofar as we make them ours. An idea is not simply a reflection: all ideas are, in the end,
different forms of the idea of human freedom. For Patočka, the crisis of meaning in the twentieth
century is linked to the loss of ideas and to the centrality of mere conceptions and of ideologies:

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without ideas as perspectives from which to make judgments, we only judge actions and possibilities based on principles that are external to us. We can do what we want with ideology, Patočka grants, except for living within it, except for realizing it and realizing ourselves through it, because ideology, which comes to us only from the outside and imposes itself on us, cannot convince us of the truth. Only ideas can.

Any great social movement incorporates all three elements: conceptions, ideas, and an ideology, but without distinguishing them. Patočka describes the socialism of the USSR, just like the fascism that was vanquished in the Second World War, and like the liberalism it now opposes, as calling upon him internally, but mostly as imposing itself from the outside: one of the results of the Second World War was the increased loss of the Idea. The war was the clash of these ideologies, a clash that radicalized them: all means were good and justified for each ideology to completely annihilate the others – and only the annihilation of one of the three could have ended the war. Fascism was defeated in such a manner that the other ideologies could only repeat the experience of fascism, of complete technicization of human existence.

While ideology only know what is feasible and what is not, the idea has to do with what is allowed and what is not, in absolute terms. Life in the Idea is related to sacrifice: as we identify ourselves, through our actions, to the idea of freedom, we can be brought to a sacrifice that is only meaningful for those who, like us, apprehend reality through this life in the Idea. This form of sacrifice is without any technical meaning and it is not to be understood through its effects, it cannot be justified through its results (since the ultimate sacrifice does not allow us to know its results). It lies in the knowledge of human fragility, of the fragility of our freedom, and in the need to protect it at all costs, so as to be able to live according to our own decisions, rather
than according to the designs of others – to live as persons who are recognized as such by others, rather than as a force to be used until it has been exhausted, and then discarded.

II. The Aftermath of Normalization

Only two years after the publication of Patočka’s defence of philosophy against political ideologies, a coup brought the Communist Party to power in Czechoslovakia, following which Patočka was barred from teaching. Patočka continued to meditate on the topics of technology and sacrifice, in close contact with these events. In the ideology that prevailed in his country, the technological aspects of labour and war had become the most important elements. Technology and the technical understanding of humanity only grasps what can be mastered and calculated: nothing is, except for what is within this world and can be used. And what’s more, we live in a technical era, which is the site of conflicts, of scissions and of oppositions that seek to heighten the power that has been made possible by the advances of technology; economic, military and political conflicts in which we figure as simple forces to be used.

From the technological perspective, it is not possible to understand the willingness of individuals to sacrifice themselves; and indeed, this sacrifice is one of the few ways in which a person can draw back from the rule of technology and take part in these conflicts over technological power in a completely different manner, which can liberate them, and us, from the domination of technology. This drawing back is at the same time an opening to Being, to what underlies the structure of our everyday lives, to what is most primordial for us as human beings, to what gives meaning to our lives. What’s more, Patočka writes, “he who takes this path gives

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to the others not simply something that can be placed ‘on order,’ though he might attempt so to
treat it, but rather, first of all, this glimpse of a reversal, a new primordial truth4."

Sacrifice, where we enter the conflicts of our era on our own terms and thus willingly,
begins for Patočka with the idea of a distinction of ranks in the order of being – where we enter
conflicts based on the idea of something greater and higher, rather than based on the ideology of
a mass of forces which only differ quantitatively. The hierarchy which allows for sacrifice in its
fullest sense, however, is not between beings, but between orders – “between human being and
the being of things, and within the sphere of the human in turn possibilities of intensification or
of failing of being5.” Sacrifice is a refusal that opens us to an understanding of what it means to
be human as opposed to being a thing, an object, a resource; and so it leads us to a fuller
understanding of ourselves, fuller than the simple life of consumption and of production to which
we have been devoting ourselves since the Second World War, Patočka also tells us. It is a
refusal that is more powerful than any acceptation, than any commitment. We can then sacrifice
ourselves in the refusal of appearing in conflicts as resources – or in the refusal of appearing in
society as productive resources and as consumers.

In sacrifice, “The entire mode of acting needs to be understood as a protest, not against
individual concrete experiences but, in principle, against the understanding by which they are
borne6.” The action of sacrifice is not a spectacle for others, for it draws our attention not to
itself, but to another dimension, to the structure of our existence, to our very being.

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4 Jan Patočka, “The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as
Danger according to M. Heidegger” in Kohák, p. 332-333.
5 Patočka, “The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as
Danger according to M. Heidegger” in Kohák, p. 336.
It is thus necessary to speak not only of the operative, underlying, general and human intentionality at play behind sacrifice, but of its context and of the social goals we actively pursue. The social questions we face are tied to the situations in which we act and through which being manifests itself, they are questions that ask us how to be free and how to act. Such questions are openings, they are mediations between us and others, they have to do with our understanding of the world. This opening to Being outlines a task: it engages and invites us to make the experiences of others into our own, to create a common world. Our freedom is the freedom to make ours these experiences of others, to take on the weight of what is most interiorly theirs, to be open to others. We must then be responsible for others and for the world that unites us by letting them be, in its fullest sense; by acting and speaking by letting them speak and act, by giving them a voice; by allowing ourselves and letting others to be shaken by these encounters. It is in this manner, through the narrative of Patočka’s actions and even through his writing, that his sacrifice can become meaningful to us, even though we haven’t faced the same reality as him.

III. Life and Charter 77

The Charter 77 movement emerged out of the protests against the arrests and convictions of members of the rock groups Plastic People of the Universe and DG 307, and as a response to the signature of the Helsinki Accords, which included protections for human rights. Patočka, who was involved from the beginning in this movement, became one of its three spokespersons, along with Václav Havel and Jiří Háyek. Through the texts he wrote about the Charter to explain it, Patočka found in human rights an expression of the Idea that would allow to bring into question the technological and instrumental perspective of the state. Human rights raise a
question of their own, which is not political: they raise the moral and spiritual question as to whether rights are integrally and absolutely respected.

However, the Charter does not leave human rights up to the state: after all, they do not belong to its domain, but to spirituality and morality, to which all politics must answer. Rather, the Charter includes the obligation of each to refuse injustice as an obligation toward himself. This obligation, Patočka continues, includes the possibility to inform others of the injustices from which we suffer. As a result, Patočka writes, “no individual who is genuinely oppressed but who is determined not to surrender his obligation to speak out for himself – which is his obligation to his society as well – should rightly feel isolated and at the mercy of overwhelming circumstances.” Charter 77 expresses the solidarity and the consciousness of ourselves and of others that are created when we take on this obligation toward ourselves and toward society, and which is at the basis of moral sentiment and of the willingness to accept a certain risk. This moral sentiment allows us to accept, without fear, the sacrifice of losing what is in our interest; it allows us to sacrifice our means of subsistence to this solidarity and these obligations, to this other understanding of what it means to be human and not simply a force to be spent.

What the Charter expresses as a movement for human rights, above all, is Patočka’s understanding of the action of sacrifice: the attention given to the Charter and the actions undertaken in its name show “that there are things for which it is worthwhile to suffer, that the things for which we might have to suffer are those which make life worthwhile” and more than simply insuring our subsistence – a sacrifice that many signatories of Charter 77 have made.

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8 Jan Patočka, “What We Can and Cannot Expect from Charta 77,” p. 346.
IV. Sacrifice and Death

In his dedication to upholding the idea of human rights and the logic of spirituality against the ideology of the state and its instrumental and technological logic, Patočka showed that just as he had been willing to sacrifice his position and the possibility to be a professional philosopher under the Nazi and Soviet occupations, he was willing to sacrifice his health, even his life. His sacrifice unveils a dimension to his writings and to his entire life: Patočka himself lived in the idea, the idea of human freedom, and thus acquired a stance that made it impossible for ideology and technologies to dominate him.

More importantly, through his writings, through the texts written by his friends and contemporaries, the experiences that led his sacrifice become our own, we can also see what freedom and philosophy meant to him – and what they can mean to us. Through his sacrifice, through an action he calls moral in the context of Charter 77, and that he had previously called political sense larger than the politics of the state⁹, Patočka ‘throws at our face’ the non-evident character of reality. This radical questioning of our presuppositions and habits shows us that there is something beyond fear, beyond our interests, beyond our daily habits, beyond our labour and our works that gives them meaning. There is a solidarity and a care for ourselves and for others expressed in Jan Patočka’s dissent that can reveal to us the limits imposed on us, which we impose on ourselves, and which we have the obligation to overcome, by a life dedicated to production and consumption, by an international system that does not recognize human rights and that is ever ready to employ us and spend us in wars.