**Abstract**

In order to show a different understanding of what it means to be human, in this paper, I will present Jan Patočka’s discussion of human existence. For Patočka, human existence is essentially historical and situational. His reflections proceed from Martin Heidegger’s explanation of the structure of human existence in *Sein und Zeit*, which Heidegger calls *Da-Sein*. According to Patočka, Heidegger’s exposition is predicated on a negative human relation to the world; we are originally inauthentic. Yet he forgets to take into account that *Da-Sein* is a doublet: *animal rationale*. Patočka appropriates Arendt’s phenomenological account of the human condition in order to critique Heidegger’s account of *Da-sein* in *Being and Time* to develop his own understanding of human existence.

**Human Existence: Patočka’s Appropriation of Arendt**

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Sophocles knew all too well that a family, οικος, and *polis* belong to each other. *Polis* is the law of the day, while a family is the law of the night, where subterranean divinities do not rule openly. They provide a much more elementary and basic function by assuring subsistence to human life. A family, οικος, is the domain of life’s necessities.

We hear everywhere about the existential crisis in our modern society. Instead of engaging with the world, the number of suicides is rising, young and not so young are abusing various drugs to ‘escape’ reality of the everyday and the cyber space of the internet is populated by many in order to avoid ‘reality’, or so we are told. It is not only an existential crisis but also the environmental one. Environmentalists warn about the depletion of natural resources that can endanger our lifestyle at the same time as more and more reports about the global warming are confirming the result of our abuse of the environment. All these symptoms of the crisis are openly acknowledged while, at the same time, science penetrating deeper and deeper into the mysteries of life is admired for its success and efficacious reasoning. So how can we think about these incompatible signs of our time? Why do we have, on the one side, portentous signs of doom, on the other, an unstoppable success in producing a desired result? Why is our society so afflicted by this deep cultural malaise, even though we are much more affluent? Almost daily, it seems, science’s discoveries are testimony to our power over nature with the promise to give us more control over life’s contingencies.

We are not surprised by these results. After all, science is the embodiment of reason that began in the Ancient Greece. It is reason that reigns supreme in the domain of a rational

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enquiry giving us all the benefits of its continuous application in the sphere nature. Yet why does scientific reasoning seem unstoppable, while reasoning on the level of society seems to be waning? Why reason there is deposed and supplanted by relativism, skepticism, mysticism, new age ideologies or just lethargy? What is the reason for our present day anxieties? Well, reason! Can science help? Should we ask science to answer those questions that are the most important for us, as people, living in the world?

In this paper, in order to offer Jan Patočka’s appropriation of Hannah Arendt, I will present the reading of Edmund Husserl’s thinking of the life-world (Lebenswelt) as a culmination of his life-long project concerned with the responsibility for our knowledge claims. By renewing Husserl’s original ‘phenomenological motives’ (Schuhmann, 1987, p. 38), Patočka provides a critique that can help us understand not only Patočka’s own phenomenology, but also sheds important light on Husserl’s concern with questions of knowledge and responsibility. Thus, one of the key aims of this article is to demonstrate the manner in which the Husserlian critique of formal knowledge and the associated concept of the ‘Lebenswelt’ continues in Patočka’s work and is developed there in important ways which continue to have contemporary relevance.

Patočka retains the Husserlian commitment to the importance of critical and honest responsibility in science but he also extends it into the way of our everyday living. This critical engagement with both Patočka and Husserl will be crucial for a historical and critical account of the ways in which the idea of the ‘Lebenswelt’ develops in Husserl's work, while clearly demonstrating the continuity of thought between Patočka and Husserl. This will substantiate Husserl's own presentation of Patočka as the true inheritor of the Husserlian tradition. Moreover, it will also provide an alternative world view to the widespread if naive assumption that not only the critique of formal knowledge, but the idea of the ‘Lebenswelt’ itself arises in Husserl only as a result of Heidegger’s influence.

Already in 1935, Husserl’s reflection on the life-world was occasioned by the crisis at the level of society. Why is it that using reasoning sciences are so successful, while on the level of society reason is mistrusted and supplanted by skepticism, relativism or irrationalism? Not even human sciences have an answer. So Husserl’s question is: “why do the so richly developed humanistic disciplines fail to perform the service here that is so admirably performed by the natural sciences in their sphere?” One of the reasons is that their enquiries

are different. Natural science is neither able to consider questions concerning “the meaning or meaninglessness” of our “human existence”, nor can it help us to inquire into what it means to be a “self-determining” human, “free in regard to his capacities for rationally shaping himself and his surrounding world”. Science cannot address questions about “reason and unreason or about us men as subjects of this freedom”. These questions are outside of scientific enquiry because, in order to present ‘objective’ knowledge of nature, science must, by definition, exclude everything that is partial. It must strip all its inquiries of the human standpoint because it is considered subjective. In order to present knowledge that every researcher can take up and continue to test, it must be impartial, in other words, objective. It is this type of an enquiry that insures the tremendous success of sciences. And science is successful!

Yet our human existence is impossible to account for without considering our particular circumstances. Does it mean, then, that the research of nature is meaningful but to enquire into human existence is meaningless? If reason is only applicable to scientific enquiries into the inanimate nature, how can we approach the present day situation? Or must we be content with knowledge that science is rational enterprise; while, on the level of society, there is no place for rational enquiry and doxa is the last word on our situation?

Patočka extends Husserl’s critique to take into account the life-world as a historical one. How can we think about human existence if reason is mistrusted? As he says, the growth of irrationalism can only come from the soil of rationalism and it must be confronted from there too.

In order to show a different understanding of what it means to be human, in this paper, I will present Jan Patočka’s discussion of human existence. Patočka, following Husserl, refuses to subscribe to the view that reason is applicable only in the sphere of sciences; hence, he approaches the question of human existence in many different ways. He maintains that it is meaningful to enquire into human existence because to reduce reasoning to its efficaciousness, as it is utilised in sciences, is to miss what it means to be a human living in the world.

For Patočka, the human existence is essentially historical and situational. His reflections proceed from Martin Heidegger’s explanation of the structure of human existence in Sein und

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4 Patočka, 1941, p. 15.
Zeit, which Heidegger calls Da-Sein. As Patočka explains, Heidegger begins with the analysis of Da-Sein, only to abandon it in his later work, leaving the enquiry open for others to expand or modify.

For Heidegger, we are thrown into the world that was here before we were born and that will be here after we die. We accept the world in which we live and draw meaning from things and people around us. In the first instance, it is from traditional ways of thinking that we draw significance, through which we understand our lives. According to Patočka, this original exposition of Heidegger is predicated on a negative human relation to the world; initially, we are drowned in the world of things, becoming one of them. Originally, our understanding of life is inauthentic. As Patočka notes, Heidegger’s account is situated “in the dimension of human moral struggle for one’s own autonomy”. For Heidegger, we are originally living inauthentically; we uncritically accept meaning from ‘the they’, from everybody and anybody, the meaning of the public anonym. In this sense, our lives are not defined by us: we accept meaning from others without even questioning it. As Patočka interprets Heidegger, our understanding is debased, we live in decline.

Yet Patočka suggests that to negatively view our original encounter with the world misses the most important aspect of our lives. We are born into the world defenceless; we rely on others to provide our nutrition, to care for us, to teach us how to use those tools – pragmata – that, for Heidegger, constitute our primary encounter with the world. Heidegger neglects something very important.

Patočka underscores the irreplaceability of others at this stage of our lives. Before we can understand the meaning of tools we need others to teach us about them; “a meaning, once understood, is always already a meaning transmitted by the other, not solipsistically created by myself”. Following from this awareness, Patočka points out that our initial encounter with the world is always located in the past, “the past which is ever inevitably with us”, because we rely on others to help us to ‘sink the roots’, ‘to anchor’ our existence in the world with others.

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7 Ibid, p. 327.
11 Ibid, p. 265.
Our initial living is in the sphere of pure sustenance. Patočka draws this insight from Hannah Arendt’s phenomenological analysis of the human condition, which she designates *vita activa*. Our fundamental encounter with the world is through labour, by procuring subsistence from nature; it is a life of consumption. Life is a never-ending cycle of labouring–consumption–subsistence, which repeats itself over and over again. Arendt uses Karl Marx’s phrase to make clearer the idea of labour by describing it as “man’s metabolism with nature”. As she explains, “labor and consumption are but two stages of the ever-recurring cycle of biological life”. Indeed, for Arendt, “The human condition of labor is life itself”. Nothing lasting is left behind. We are simply consuming in order to live: “life itself depends upon it”.

For Patočka, then, when considering human existence, it is important to take into account this recurring cycle of biological life. It is this aspect of our life that is expressed in the doublet of *animal rationale*. We are not only rational beings who practically act in the world but also *animal laborans*. Life is the never-ending cycle of labour and consumption. In this respect, the subsistence of life is a perpetual cycle of renewing itself, as Arendt observes.

Patočka points out that Heidegger neglects what the Ancient Greeks already knew that *Da-Sein* is a doublet: *animal* and *rationale*. We are both, animals who practically act in the world learning to reason, as well as animals for whom the life is a never-ending cycle of consumption. Here, the principal constituent of our life is life itself. Life consumes the world forever to produce only itself. Heidegger’s neglect of this side of our existence leads him to assert that some of us can overcome the negativity of our existence, if we only confront the public anonym’s meaning, if we only confront our finitude. But even if we do that, we still have to take care of our life’s never-ending cycle of consumption. From that point of view, life is forever in decline because the doublet of *animal rationale* is precisely that! We are both biological bodies and rational beings; not just one or the other. We need to acknowledge this dual character of our lives. Life is always a struggle between living in decline, as our biological bodies remind us, and our never-ending attempts to rise above this decline. It is not superfluous or negative to think of this interplay of our living: “the human life is a harsh play”, based on the initial decline. For Patočka, perhaps, it is our fundamental characteristic.

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13 Arendt, (1958) 1998, pp. 79 ff. Patočka uses ‘work’ in place of Arendt’s ‘labour; and ‘production’ in place of ‘work’.
14 Ibid, p. 98.
16 Ibid, p. 87.
to be in decline. Human existence is not only threatened by inauthenticity produced by the public anonym; it is fundamentally underwritten by our biological bodies. By the same token, to reduce our existence to our biological bodies is to miss who we are because we can rise above the biological level of our lives.

Patočka radicalises Heidegger’s structure of existence by taking into account the body, yet without reducing it to its material substrate; i.e., a body is not an ontic ‘thing’ that is simply given but it is essential to the structure of existence. The body that ‘I am’ cannot be exhausted by categorial descriptions; it is not only biological body that science makes its object of enquiry. The body is irreducibly tied to my existence, which is always defined by my situatedness in the world; it is the zero-point of my encounter with the world.

To confront the question of our biological bodies is to reflect on modern ‘objective’ knowledge that is a defining characteristic of our age. We want to know all there is to know about nature, including ourselves as a part of that nature. But is it possible to explain human life using a scientific model, say, the model of biology or neuroscience? No doubt, most scientific research is devoted to this task and there are some interesting results relating to our biological bodies coming from neurology, biology, chemistry. But the question remains: is this all that we can ‘know’ about human existence; is this all that it means to be human?

To understand this quandary, let us recall the problem of modern philosophy and, as Husserl notes, our natural attitude. The Cartesian split of the world into two substances, res cogitans and res extensa. In order to confront the skepticism of his time, René Descartes’ search for clarity and perspicuity of knowledge leads him to posit the ground of this certitude in the indubitability of our thinking, res cogitans. As Husserl and Patočka point out, in the ‘I’, Descartes ‘discloses’ the personal. Yet despite his stumbling upon the personal dimension of the ‘I’, he obscures this discovery by shifting his attention to res extensa, which could be accounted for by geometry. As Patočka notes, the Cartesian cogito is quaternio terminorum. It is the personal ‘I think’ as well as the “permanent [trvalá] substance with all the attributes belonging to it”, res cogitans, the impersonal ground of certainty. On the one hand, only a thought that is clear and distinct (clare et distincte) can certify the being of a thing (res extensa). On the other, Descartes’ new “ontological conception” – derived from Galileo and Newton – is no longer nature as we experience it in our everyday living, but nature constructed in thought, where clare et distincte ideas are certified by mathematics.

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Calculation is based on principles that are impossible to verify by human experience, leading to an indirect mathematisation of nature. The contemplation of nature is replaced by a construction of mathematised structures that become knowable objects.\textsuperscript{20}

On this model, \textit{res extensa} becomes a knowable ‘object’ based on the clear and distinct ideas of \textit{res cogitans}; yet a thinking thing cannot be converted into a geometrical manifold. This is the outcome of the unacknowledged equivocation between the two senses of \textit{cogito}. Our thinking processes might be certain for each of us but they are impossible to ‘compare’ with others; they cannot be taken as identical to the thinking processes of someone else. The personal ‘I’ becomes reduced to our thinking only, the thinking thing, separated from the world in which we live. Correlatively, the world of our living is reduced to the impersonal substrate thought of as \textit{res extensa}. Matter alone can be expressed through “\textit{extensio}, \textit{cogitatio}, and so forth”.\textsuperscript{21} Only matter can be thought identically by everyone because only an object – \textit{res extensa} – can be converted hypothetically into its numerical indices. The question of correlation between two separate substances is resolved by “the principle of psychophysical parallelism”. Only on this model, can “mental events [be] added as a correlate, an epiphenomenon” because thinking becomes \textit{impersonal} ‘thinking thing’ – \textit{res cogitans} separated from matter – \textit{res extensa}. Matter is privileged as the only knowable substance accounted for by the thinking thing. Certainty of knowledge is based on the privileged forms supplied by geometry because it can be reckoned with.\textsuperscript{22} Knowledge is assured, skepticism is confronted and overcome, but the personal is lost.

It is this separation of the world into two substances – privileging the mathematised nature over the personal dimension of our lives – that leads to the problem of the modern discussion of human life. Suddenly, to speak of knowledge is to speak about our life in terms of \textit{res extensa} only. Only in the sphere of matter can we achieve a certitude that can be confirmed or falsified by many different researchers. We can always come back to the ‘objective data’ of life discovered by science: blood circulation, muscles, firing neurons, MRI scans of brain activity which supposedly tell us about our thinking by ‘mapping’ the electro-magnetic activity of sections of our brains that are ‘activated’ when we love and hate.\textsuperscript{23} But can this so-called objective knowledge tell us about love and hate as we live it? What has science to offer in the case of our human existence?

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{20} Patočka, 2002, p. 471.
\item\textsuperscript{21} Patočka, 1995, p. 26. See also Patočka, 1996a, p. 30.
\item\textsuperscript{22} Patočka, 1996a, p. 30.
\item\textsuperscript{23} See Kahn (2008).
\end{footnotes}
If science is, as Patocka states, “nothing else but an assertion that two times two is four in an elaborate manner”, then where does the ‘definition’ of love and hate come from? Is it not the case that before we even begin to research something like the relation between our feelings and brain activity, love and hate must first be defined by researchers and matched to the understandings of participants? There is already implicit understanding of what it means to love and hate. And this can only come from the world of our living. So, despite these scientific findings, we already understand those feelings on a more basic level because we live with others. As Patočka notes, it is a part of our human interaction with others, our social existence, which is always already based on an irreplaceable, fundamental and original understanding of others. No chemical formulae can tell us about reciprocal relations between humans, no formulae can be meaningful without human experience between people; “their mutual sympathies and dislikes, their cooperation and reciprocal dependencies on each other – it is here where love and hate dwell”. No impersonal scientific research can give us appreciation of the meaning of these emotions. “Human actions are always intelligible to us, even if we cannot substantiate this understanding by physicalist explanations.”

To understand human conduct means also that we understand the things around us, that we understand the world. We are not monads, living in our separate private worlds: we live together in a concrete historical situation, we work, love, yearn, and play with others. This is what makes us human. Patočka recalls Aristotle to suggest that there is something more basic that constitutes our humanity, our being human. No “modern mathematical physics or chemistry” can explain our being. Science can tell us about our biological bodies but can scientists as scientists say anything about love and hate, about our being with others, about our hopes and disappointments? For Patočka, then, the important question is: is science the only arbiter of knowledge? Or, to put it differently, “what is more resolute and significant? Is this mute and seemingly indifferent universe, without any meaning in itself, our last word? Or, on the contrary, is the human the key that can, perhaps, partially open this universe? To put it differently, how can the objectified nature constructed in thought on the model of mathematics be the ground from which we derive the meaning of our human existence? In the first place, it was constructed by humans to unlock the secrets of inanimate nature and

25 I owe this point to Anita Williams.
26 Patočka, 1994, p. 84.
27 Ibid, pp. 84-5.
29 “Neboť zůstane tu ovšem otázka: co je rozhodnější a významnější? Je němé a na pohled zcela lhostejné a nesmyslné univerzum posledním slovem o člověku, nebo je naopak člověk klíčem, kterým možno alespoň pootevřít univerzum?” (Ibid).
suddenly it becomes a model to understand us as if we were also just one thing alongside other things.

To confront this dilemma between formalised, efficacious, reasoning of sciences and existential reasoning, Patočka accepts Heidegger’s analysis: the impossibility of understanding human existence on the same level as we understand things in the world; and the emptiness of the ‘I’ tied to our initial relation to the world of things and to the public anonym, ‘the they’.

The first issue arising from an analysis of Da-Sein is the emptiness of the ‘I’. Originally, ‘I’ is everyone and no one.30 [REF] We accept the way society functions, we follow the established ways of thinking and doing, we work, act and think without questioning anything at all. The ‘I’ is empty because it is interchangeable; we all work, we all follow established ways of ‘doing things’. We are part of the public anonym. We can shake up our everydayness, our reliance on the public anonym only if we confront our finitude, if we realise that no one can take away our only certainty in life – that we will die – simply because our own death is irreplaceable, no one can step in to die instead of us. Only by shaking up our inauthentic reliance on the public anonym, we might realise that it is we who must define the meaning of our lives.

As Patočka suggests, our life is finite, it is lived between two outer limits: we are born and we will die. Those two boundaries are irreplaceable. They are by definition outside of the public anonym, outside of the habitual ways in which society functions. They are ours only. To be born means to enter the world that antedates us.31 Similarly for Arendt, “the fact of natality” is “the miracle that saves the world”32 because to be born is to insert someone new into the midst of human affairs, to instantiate a new beginning in the world.33 As she reminds us,

Action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behavior, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing. Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.34

Our existence is not interchangeable, as the public anonym leads us to believe. Each existence is unique.

34 Ibid, p. 8.
Yet to refuse to be defined by the public anonym means that we have to take up our own living without the banisters provided by anonymous society. It is not easy. The question is, then, can we take up the harshness of living without the support of ‘the they’?

How we carry on our living, what kind of existence we live, depends on each of us because we are and we are not only the public anonym. We are and we are not only *animalia*, the biological body. We are *animal rationale*: an animal *rationis capax*, capable of reasoning. This is one of the reasons why human life as we live it cannot be exhausted by considering it, either on the level of a never-ending cycle of survival in order to live, or by the account given by science. Although science discovers ‘facts’ within the sphere of our biological bodies and converts them into data that can help us, perhaps, to understand life in general, it cannot proceed from scientific data to the meaning of our existence.

There is a similarity between understanding life as an object of science and life as consuming itself in order to live. In both cases, it is a life of everybody and nobody: no personal space is available to change the situation. In the case of biological body, the incessant consumption defines us all on the same level. To live we must nourish our bodies in the never-ending cycle of toiling and consumption, devouring the world to sustain ourselves. Likewise, in the case of biological body constituted as an ‘object’ of science. The personal situation is by definition excluded. Science must be able to reckon with, to quantify this ‘life’ through unambiguous data that every other researcher can examine; allowing all to access the same information in order to expand the research of ‘life’ through new observations and experiments. Both types of understanding are proclaimed as definitive of our circumstances, our human existence.

Yet our existence is personal. It cannot be lived by anyone else. So, if we accept that human existence is personal, always lived in the first person, then we must also accept that it is outside of the jurisdiction of science. Science can only deal with facts that are applicable to everyone. So to ask again: does it mean that our existence is meaningless? How can we think about it?

For Patočka, to exist means to actively shape our existence. It is we who can become who we are. Not in the sense of creating ourselves as an artwork. Our existence is neither an object forever identical with itself, nor it is something plastic, mouldable by us in whatever way we
wish: we cannot shape our life according to a design that we conjure up ‘in our minds’ for ourselves.35

Hence, drawing on Heidegger’s analysis, the second point that Patočka highlights is that we are not objects. Who ‘I am’ cannot be exhausted by categorial descriptions of human life as if I were a thing alongside other things in the world. We are always more than things in the world. A thing is a singular instantiation of the genus/species. A rock will be a rock, a tree will grow and change its shape, but what a tree is will not change. An oak tree might be crooked or tall according to nutrients, wind currents, sun, but it cannot be anything else but an oak tree. All oak trees can be accounted for according to the species they belong to; a tree may decay and perish but a species persists throughout time. The material substrate is the same for all members of the species. They can be accounted for according to categorisation, including external conditions, internal nourishment, and so forth. The question is whether humans are also only biological bodies.

Certainly, we can view our biological bodies according to categories as well. For science, that is exactly what our body is. Yet, can this type of ‘categorisation’ help us to speak about our lived bodies and about our lived experience? Is our biological body who we are?

Who we are is not reducible to our biological body because the sphere of human existence cannot be accounted for scientifically. It is not repeatable in the same manner for all observers. There is no one template that can account for the lives that we live. Our lived existence is not the same for all according to a species of homo sapiens. Yes, as an instance of the biological species, I am a member of the homo sapiens class but this knowledge refers only to my biological formation. But who I am is not exhausted by my biological constitution. We are not only biological organism, we are animal rationale; we exist in the world that is tied to our human situatedness, and, hence, changeable with it. Not in the sense of wind currents, sun and nutrients: there is something more to our living in the world. Categorial descriptions are not appropriate to account for our lived experience. Yet if we cannot account for existence in terms of categories, as Heidegger posits, then how can we speak of our existence at all?

Heidegger’s enquiry into the ontic and ontological structure of Da-Sein is the first step in his quest to recover the Ancient question of being: Sein. For Heidegger, this question was

35 Arendt expressed this by saying that we cannot know human nature because we did not make it. We can only know what the product of our hands is. For her, we can only inquire into our human condition.
forgotten in the history of thinking. In our present age, this question seems both empty and meaningless; or, we all seem to know what being means and yet no one can explain it. To reclaim this question, Heidegger starts with human existence because it is only we who can understand our own being, therefore, opening the space for further enquiry into being, which underlies all and yet is not something we can encounter in the world. For Heidegger, Da-Sein is the opening for the reflection on Sein – being.

Patočka’s focus is different. He is interested in what it means to be human. He rejects Heidegger’s reading of the history of being. As Patočka points out, in the end, it is the history of being (Seinsgeschichte) that in Heidegger obliterates the consideration of humans as the situational and historical beings responsible for their acting in the world. Hence, Patočka radicalises Heidegger’s structure of existence. As he affirms, we cannot plan out or organise our own possibilities because those possibilities are not objectively in front of us as if we were disinterested observers. Nor is it liberum arbitrium indifferentiae, we do not have the freedom of choice to select from different possibilities presented to us in a particular situation. We are our possibilities. Freedom is not something we have; freedom is what defines us as human. We are free to act or not, given the particular possibilities of a given situation. The possibilities are opened up or closed off for us according to the situation we are in; according to the things that surround us and demarcate for us the possible courses of action that we can seize or overlook. As Patočka puts it: “A situation is something where I must be in order to understand it (not above or in front of it), and I can always only understand it partially”.

Each situation opens up different possibilities.

Situation is not something external. It is not a container in which we find ourselves. It is not a mechanism that holds us through a system of springs, allowing us only to react to the elasticity of the springs. As Patočka notes, this would be a description of animals. But we are not animals. We are animal rationale because we can each act differently in a given situation. If we find ourselves on a ship that is sinking, our situation is not an ocean, or the bad condition of a ship. We are in this situation because we happened to set off on a journey. If there were no one on that ship, the ship might indeed sink, but it would not be a human situation as Patočka understands it, because humans might be able, indeed, to change the situation they are in.

For Patočka, to be situational does not mean to be in some place that we simply pass through, and it also does not mean that we are in space as objective things are; we are not *partes extra partes*. We are not indifferent to things and others that we encounter. We are situational beings. Humans cannot *be* in any other way; we are always in different situations because this is what it means to be human: “the fundamental human situation [prasituace] is to be always in some situation”. To *be* in a situation always creates a problem because we come face to face with something that needs to be resolved, that we need to confront, that requires us to act one way or the other.

Humans always actively *relate* to their situation, form it, and create it through reflection. They do not *re-act* but actively *act*. Even doing nothing is a way of acting. This is tied to a human ontological structure. We *are* free. We can act or not act in relation to a situation because we are free in respect to that situation. Of course, it does not mean that we are unaffected by the situation or that we can simply eradicate it by thought alone. Not even Neo in *The Matrix* could do that. To paraphrase Patočka, our real test is not how well we play the role we dreamt up for ourselves, but how well we play the hand we have been dealt in a situation we find ourselves in. No human situation is closed off. We can mentally distance ourselves from what is immediate and reflect on a situation. A situation creates problems for us by presenting only certain possible actions that we can undertake; it calls upon us to reflect, take a stand and act. To be able to reflect on a situation, we must be free.

Patočka’s notion of freedom is not about our empirical freedom to do something in the world of our living, although this type of freedom is underwritten by our ontological potentiality. In this sense, the idea of freedom precedes our particular existence. Freedom is the condition of our ability to act in the world; it is what makes us human. How we embody this potentiality in the world of our living would be another discussion. As Patočka understands the idea of freedom, it simply means that to be a human is to be free. We are free because we can always turn away from what is presented to us immediately and reflect on memories of a different situation or a fantasy in order to consider what we are up against. To be able to reflect, to distance ourselves from the immediate situation, will lead us to act in a certain way that was brought about not only by the situation we are in but also by our reflection on that situation. Yet it is not the case that we stop, pause, think, reflect, decide on the best possible action and

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then act. Our acting is informed by our unthematised reflection; most of the time, we do not even realise that our acting is not an automated response to a stimulus but a considered action. We simply act.

Our existence is our acting.\textsuperscript{44} In a situation, we can only actualise possibilities that are presented to us by taking them up or refusing them, not realising them, or giving them up. Thereby, by avoiding some possibilities, we open up others, and so on. Human existence is nothing else but this actualisation or running away from situational possibilities. For this reason, Patočka speaks of existence as a movement.\textsuperscript{45}

Historicity

A historical being...is a being who distinguishes among that which is given, that which is lost and irretrievably gone, and that which does not yet exist except in the mode of unfulfilment in what is present. A historical being leans on the past, using it to open up the horizon of the given, with its help overcoming the given and the present. He can do that, however, only if the power of dissociation is available to him, the power of dissociation from mere givenness and presence, the power of liberation from the purely objective and given.\textsuperscript{46}

Yet to think of possibilities as something given to us is to miss what it means to be human. Think of athletes, or survivors of famine, or, in a much more disquieting way, of the survivors of concentration camps. There is always much more to us than our biological bodies. We can always rise above the situation we are in. We can change situational possibilities by thinking about them and through reflection we can change the way we live in the world. Surely, we cannot change our species. We cannot become birds and start flying, for example, but we can create human institutions that allow us space for the free exchange of ideas. This is what Patočka asserts when he speaks of humans as being historical. In agreement with Husserl and Heidegger, his thesis is that history began in Ancient Greece. This was the time when mythical explanations ceased to have power over people’s thinking and the world revealed itself as something that needed a new explanation. It was the time of the beginning of Greek science, philosophy and polis.

Freedom suddenly became something tangible: it was the freedom of free citizens within the polis. It was the opening of a different space; the space created by humans for humans. It was a new institution that was independent of the divine being of a king, as in civilisation prior to the Greeks. It was the creation of political space in which free citizens could exchange words

\textsuperscript{44} In a certain way, as Nietzsche noted, “there is no ‘being’ behind doing...‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything” (Nietzsche, 1989, I, §13).

\textsuperscript{45} See Patočka, 1969, p. 694.

\textsuperscript{46} Patočka, (1953) 1989, p. 199.
and deeds among themselves, in freedom. According to Patočka, history [dějiny] is “human conscious shaping of life by humans themselves”. Hence, Patočka affirms Arendt’s analysis of the connection between the private sphere of the oikos and the public space of the polis. For the Ancient Greeks, the oikos was the space of life’s necessities, the enslavement of life by life. The polis was the space of freedom. According to Patočka, the ancient civilisations, such as Egypt, China or Mesopotamia, were large oikos defined by life’s necessities only. The Greek polis is different. It was created through “an upheaval aimed at the former meaning of life as a whole”. The Ancient Greeks created a new public space “for the sake of,’ a new ou heneka”; they created the polis for the sake of freedom among citizens because the situation required new ways of thinking and acting. “It [was] a leap into new meaning which [was] realized in the clarity of the problematic situation”.

To be historical is to confront the present day crisis in order to shape the future. As he sees it, there is precedence to the loss of meaning that we are confronting today. To be sure, the problems were different but the space of questioning that was opened up in the Ancient Greece is important for us to revisit.

The situational and historical understanding of who we are is first confronted in Ancient Greece. The new answers to a situation that was changing in their lifetime prompted the Greeks to seek new meaning. And this meaning was sought “in the mode of questioning because the question is [always] built up on an awareness of the problematic nature of meaning”. For Patočka, then, we are historical if we can distance ourselves from the present situation in order to question it. Our questioning might lead to a new understanding that will, in turn, help us to change the present.

**Conclusion**

The exclusiveness with which the total world-view of modern man...let itself be determined by the positive sciences and be blinded by the ‘prosperity’ they produced, meant an indifferent

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47 The Czech word dějiny means history. However, its etymological root is derived from the verb diať sa, meaning to take place or happen (in an active sense), while the root of the word history is from the Greek historiā, from histōr, meaning knowing. I suggest that there is a difference between knowing and happening, which is implicit in the meanings of those two words. Similarly, the German word Geschichte from geschehen means ‘to happen’; thus, history is also a recounted story. For the difference in the meanings of the word history and Geschichte, see Koselleck, 1985.
49 Patočka, 1996b, p. 141.
50 Ibid, p. 142.
turning-away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity. Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people.\textsuperscript{51}

To conclude with Patočka and Arendt: for Patočka, the human life has three dimensions; it is related to the beginning, the end and to life necessities in the form of the never-ending cycle of consumption.\textsuperscript{52} And because there is a similarity between biological life as an object studied by science and biological life defined by consumption only, he points out that because we are \textit{animal rationale}, in our struggle between these two aspects of who we are, the modern age privileged the space of biology: \textit{animal}.\textsuperscript{53} Arendt’s claim is similar, the problem of reducing human experience to biological necessities and by substituting scientific facts for the world of our living leads to “the modern growth of wordlessness, the withering away of everything \textit{between us}”. For her, this is “the spread of the desert”.\textsuperscript{54} In the end, the progression of modern science reduces humans to “no more than a special case of organic life”\textsuperscript{55} subsumed under the ends-means category of modern thinking.\textsuperscript{56}

We need to recall Patočka’s claim cited above and extend it: if science is “nothing else but an assertion that two times two is four in an elaborate manner”, then we must also recognise that science is a practical affair; it belongs to our practical, everyday life, the life preoccupied with means and ends only.\textsuperscript{57} In sciences, this type of thinking is formalised, becoming the efficacious reasoning. To recognise that is to recognise also that science is very successful what it achieves. However, to understand reasoning on the scientific level is to forget that it is not the only way to account for the world. It is to forget that reasoning is also expressed by the Socratic question: ‘what do you mean when you say…?’ This type of question is impossible to answer by formalised knowledge. Yet our present world is reduced to efficacious reasoning only. The life is reduced to calculable data that eliminate any other consideration of what it means to live one’s own life or to be among others living their different lives; while, at the same time, the seduction with scientific achievements led us to extend this type of reasoning – in other words, efficacious reasoning that is concerned with the means-end categories – to the space of human affairs. We have reduced understanding of

\textsuperscript{51} Husserl, (1954) 1970, §2 [pp. 5-6].
\textsuperscript{52} “Život člověka má vždycky tyto tři velké dimenze: vztak k začátku, vztak ke konci a vztak k životu jakožto propadlému této nutnosti” (Patočka, (1974) 2002b, p. 300).
\textsuperscript{53} For a similar claim but stressing psychologism rather than biologism, as Patočka does, see Gurwitsch, 1945.
\textsuperscript{54} Arendt, 2005, p. 201, italics in original.
\textsuperscript{55} Arendt, 1968, p. 266.
\textsuperscript{56} Arendt, 1993, p. 147
life to the biological level only: the never-ending consumption that devours the whole earth, threatening not only our lives but the planet as well.\textsuperscript{58}

For Arendt, similarly, to recognise the importance of recent reduction of life to “the matter of merely laboring and consuming is of crucial importance” because it leads to the present situation of crisis where “nobody cares any longer what the world looks like”.\textsuperscript{59} Yet, as long as “we are and remain aware that our problems are unprecedented and that we do indeed live in a situation of crisis”,\textsuperscript{60} we can recover meaning for ourselves, we can confront “the outstanding characteristics of our time” defined by “thoughtlessness – the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty”. To do so, however, we must “think what we are doing”.\textsuperscript{61}

In his lecture course from 1974, Patočka notes that either this society will collapse, or we will realise that we have to take responsibility not only for our own lives but for the way our society functions. Scientific reasoning is very successful in the domain of inanimate nature, giving us many advantages that make our life easier. However, this type of thinking is not successful when it comes to our existence because science is concerned about unchangeable, therefore, objective aspects of nature. It cannot give us answers about the most important aspect of our lives: how to procure meaning from this mute, scientifically conjured-up universe, which is indifferent to our lived experience of the world; which is indifferent to what makes us human.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} For an extended discussion, see Patočka, 1996b.
\textsuperscript{59} Arendt, (1964) 2000, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{60} Arendt, 1966, p. 114.
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