

**PATOČKA'S SOCRATES:
THE CARE FOR THE SOUL AND HUMAN EXISTENCE**

**EL SÓCRATES DE PATOČKA:
EL CUIDADO DEL ALMA Y LA EXISTENCIA HUMANA**

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Abstract: In order to get out of present day discussions between (for example) determinism and free will, creationism and evolution, *bios* and *zoē*, human existence and biological life – those dead end binaries of our present day thinking into which we have manoeuvred ourselves – we need to revisit the Ancient discussions relating to the care of the soul and human existence. I will draw together these two themes from Jan Patočka's writings by anchoring them in his account of Socrates who was the first to emphasise the idea of human responsibility not only for thinking but also for human acting in the world. I will argue that the significant common feature – the care for our own being, our existence – brings Patočka's reflections on the care for the soul and care for our human existence together. While, according to Patočka, the notion of the care for the soul was displaced from the philosophical reflection by the modern scientific venture, the idea of human existence is, although problematic from the scientific point of view, still a part of our experience.

Key Words: Patočka, Socrates, Care for the Soul, Human Existence.

Resumen: Para librarnos de discusiones contemporáneas entre (por ejemplo) determinismo y libre albedrío, creacionismo y evolución, *bios* y *zoē*, existencia humana y vida biológica, estos binomios, callejones de salida del pensamiento de hoy en los que nos hemos metido, tenemos que volver a escuchar las discusiones de la Antigüedad sobre el cuidado del alma y la existencia humana. Voy a recuperar estos dos temas de escritos de Jan Patočka, anclándolos en su interpretación de Sócrates, el primero en poner énfasis en la idea de responsabilidad humana no solo de su pensamiento sino también de su actuar en el mundo. Argumentaré que el significativo rasgo común, esto es, el cuidado por nuestro propio ser, nuestra existencia, es lo que une las reflexiones de Patočka sobre el cuidado del alma y el cuidado de la existencia humana. Mientras que, según Patočka, la noción del cuidado del alma ha sido desplazada de la reflexión filosófica por la empresa científica moderna, la idea de la existencia humana, a pesar de lo problemático que puede resultar desde un punto de vista científico, todavía forma parte de nuestra experiencia.

Palabras clave: Patočka, Sócrates, cuidado del alma, existencia humana.

1. INTRODUCTION

Present day understanding of our place in the world and our lives therein is caught in dead end binaries, such as determinism and free will, creationism and evolution, *bios* and *zoē*, that is, human existence and biological life. While binaries are part and parcel of our everyday life helping us to understand particulars with which we live, such as short and tall, day and night, dead and alive; we have manoeuvred ourselves into a situation where we privilege certain binaries, saturate them with historical meaning that transgresses our particular place in the world and create the framework that is then taken as the uncontested horizon of all meaning. Thus, for example, life is understood in terms of biology, where responsibility is non-existent. Given the investment of scientific thinking to impartiality, 'objectivity', eliminating all that is personal, the problem is to account for human responsibility in the world, which is covered over by modern science that constitutes the horizon of all meaning in our present day. In order to start questioning this uncontested meaning, I will argue, in this paper, that we need to revisit the Ancient discussions relating to the care of the soul and human existence. I will anchor these two strands by taking into account Patočka's reflections on the role of Socrates in our philosophical tradition.

For Patočka, it was Socrates who first emphasised the idea of human responsibility not only for human thinking but also for our acting in the world. As Patočka sees it, the Greek heritage on which Europe was built is the idea of ἐπιμέλεια τῆς ψυχῆς – the care for the soul. This theme, already present in his 1947 lecture-course *Socrates* (Patočka, 1991), can be found throughout Patočka's oeuvre, culminating in his underground seminars in the 1970s¹. I will argue that the significant common feature – the care for our own being, our existence – brings Patočka's reflections on the care for the soul and human existence together. While, according to Patočka, the notion of the care for the soul was displaced from the philosophical reflection by the modern scientific venture, the idea of human existence is, although problematic from the scien-

¹ In English translation, the most sustained discussion of this idea is in his book *Plato and Europe*: Patočka, 2002d.

tific point of view, still part of our experience, even though science cannot say anything about it.

Before I consider Patočka's reflections on the idea of the care for the soul and his consideration of human existence, let me sketch the usual history of ideas: the order of *kosmos* that allowed the Ancients to contemplate the ideas of truth, justice and good life was dissolved into the Christian ideas of *ens creatum* and the creator God, which in turn was replaced by the mathematical universe of modern science. The new science carved up the world into its constituent parts, smaller and smaller as it progressed into the mapping of the universe into mathematical formulae. The Ancient *kosmos* as well as God's created world disappear in their own right. They were objectified, turned into physicalist nature which is nothing else but a collection of 'objects' that modern science can account for. The *verum factum* principle – the modern principle that we can know only what we built from the clear and distinct ideas – turned nature into algorithms by giving us a way to predict forces of nature. Yet do these mathematical operations help us to understand our human existence? In order to confront the present stalemate in our thinking about human existence into which our tradition has led us, we need to revisit the Ancient discussions to uncover the original ground that became forgotten².

To consider anew the Ancient thinking, Patočka notes that social and historical circumstances shape all the concrete structures of human life, which include not only language, law and the state, but also the objects of material civilization. The "*world as a whole* is originally nothing objective", it is not nature as modern science assumes it to be, standing apart from us. (Patočka, 1996b: 6, italics in original). For Patočka, the 'structures' of human life are historical, they are the result of what he calls the fundamental conflict (*prakonflikt*) that is enacted over our relationship towards the world as a whole, which is the basis of our humanity³. It is "the conflict between being and having, *esse* and *habere*". These two possibilities mark our relationship towards the world, whereby either the world gives meaning to everything, or, we take the world as our rightful possession that we can use as we see fit. Our understanding of our place in the world follows from these two possibilities.

² Yet it is still present in our thinking.

³ See also Patočka 2002 [1942].

Modern scientific solution is to disregard the whole as something existing in its own right by reducing the whole to the aggregate of objectified things, to which we assign meaning according to a formal schema – thereby deluding ourselves that we can *possess* and master all that-is (Patočka, 2002b: 602). The whole ceases to exist as the explanatory horizon that anchors our understanding of the world and our place in it. Patočka further claims that our civilisation is defined by the victory of *habere*. As a result, our relationship to nature changes also. All we have left are things that science can account for, thereby giving us the feeling of the ownership of nature. This new possessive understanding of nature extends to our entire human condition. The mode of possessiveness defines our relationship with others. Instead of compassion, selflessness and the care for the soul, we categorize, classify, catalogue, and label others in accordance with their usefulness.

This new understanding infused by '*habere*' permeates all spheres of life. Concern with chattels supersedes and negates the old Socratic questions what it is that makes us just and how to lead a good life. We no longer contemplate the questions of the good, just and beautiful. We no longer understand what it means to take care of our soul because the old Socratic question "What is justice?" could not be answered positively⁴. This type of reflection requires more than just a formal language of mathematics. Those contemplations are based precisely on the ideas that cannot be 'proved' by science. The idea of justice, for example, cannot be answered but only presupposed while we point to particular cases of just or unjust actions.

When the primacy of our human responsibility for living and knowing is overlooked by privileging the use of formalised language of science, the outcome is a spiritual crisis of European thinking. The reason is that science is predicated precisely on the notions of 'impartiality', 'verifications', experiments that can be successful only if the changeability, fluctuation, contingency and change are hypothetically removed from the consideration of researchers. To accept that scientific reasoning stands for all human reasoning is simply false.

⁴ Consider, of course, the idea of triangle. It is the same problem. As Jean-Luc Marion writes, "no mathematical ideality can find an adequate fulfillment in actually experienced space; ... the signification of *straight line*, or of *curve of the equation $ax + b$* , or even of *triangle*, will never meet an adequate fulfillment in the experiences of intuition that are actually realized by a consciousness. No doubt, the equation will continually find fulfilling intuitions, but in each case that will be for a particular value of unknowns, never for its abstract, universal essence as such" (Marion, 1998: 23-24, italics in original).

We must confront the crisis we experience in order to realise that science is successful in the domain of inanimate nature because it can consider 'know-how' only. It simply cannot deal with the questions that are pertinent to our everyday living, to our human, changeable and contingent existence.

2. HUMAN EXISTENCE

Existence is not possible to explicate in scientific 'clear and distinct ideas.' It is not something that we can define precisely. Scientific success is based on the ability to fix its concepts as something repeatable at all times under the same conditions. This precision in clarity and repeatability is transformed into efficiency. Yet can we think about our existence in the same terms? How is it possible to communicate in ideas that cannot be 'clear and distinct?' How can we communicate when the clarity is lacking, how can we convince others about our life (Patočka, 1969: 682)?

In Patočka's reflections, man is neither a ruler of the world nor a thing within. Humans are finite creatures that are "always essentially in a hopeless situation" (Patočka, 2002a: 2). Yet, as he notes, "the human situation is something that changes once we become self-conscious about it" (Patočka, 2002a: 1). His example is of a stranded ship. Our human life is like a "ship that necessarily will be shipwrecked" (Patočka, 2002a: 2). However, our situation will be different if we resign ourselves to hopelessness or if we fight against the odds. It is true that for the most part our circumstances are not our doing, "in this form our life is, in a certain sense, something that is not solely human" (Ibid.). We find ourselves in different situations all the time. Yet each situation is already something more than this 'beyond our control' material constituent. We are also more than just biological creatures in a sense that if we reflect upon the situation we are in, it becomes clear that there are certain possibilities open to us. We can always go beyond the given, material, conditions of our world because we can think through our predicament. We are conscious human beings that can act in a certain way even though the situation we are in demarcates our acting. The current state of affairs is determined materially and yet not entirely because "a reflected-upon situation – in contrast to a naive situation – is to a certain extent a clarified one, or at least on the way to clarification" (Patočka, 2002a: 1).

Patočka's claim is not that our reflection can solve the predicament of our technologised world, but if there is a possibility of change, it can only follow from an understanding of why and how this situation came about. For Patočka, "to reflect upon what we are in – about our situation – ultimately means to reflect how [our human] situation appears today" (Patočka, 2002a: 2). We cannot arrive at the truth of our situation, unless we critically reflect upon it (Patočka, 1999 [1973]: 150).

The reflection as a moment of action is based on living our life with its modalities of appearance, concealment, illusion, lie, and their opposites (Patočka, 2009 [1969]: 342). For Patočka, when we realize that human life is lived between truth and un-truth – revealing and concealing of things in the world –, the reflection is already a moment of action. Truth cannot be reduced to the scientific idea of verification. The primordial, original reflection that Patočka uncovers is a part of our living in the world, where the world is the meaning horizon that demarcates our lives. Truth and untruth are modalities of our living in the world and they are prior to any contemplation about propositional or scientific ideas of truth. To live in truth simply means that we understand that we are part of the world and despite the fact that our human existence is finite and unpredictable, we relate to the world that we live in by disclosing other beings to ourselves and, through language, to others. For Patočka, to exist does not mean that we imagine our plans, our intentions, and ourselves by judging them while we stand over, against them. Living in truth means we live and act out possibilities that we are. Possibilities are not different options that we can contemplate and chose; they are not different alternatives that we can think about and implement. To live in possibilities is to exist as finite human beings who are thrown into different situations and have to lead their life. It means that our acting is not only in the moment we are in but also we live ahead of ourselves, so to speak (Patočka, 2009 [1969]: 346). This being so, it also means that thinking about our existence cannot be reduced to scientific knowledge because our contingent, finite lives must be considered through a different order of understanding.

Forgetting that our existence cannot be reduced to scientific considerations only, we accept that our existence is explainable by science only. We stop questioning the reduction of our lives to biological, or neurological, explanations. We believe that only scientific reasoning is rigorous and everything else is

relegated to superstitions and unverified traditional thinking. We conflate all forms of reasoning to only one possible mode, the scientific one. This fusion of reasoning is the root of the crisis of European society.

3. SOCRATES

According to Patočka, in order to understand the existential crisis of European societies, we must first understand how it came about, what are reasons for it and if it is something unique in our human history. Therefore, to understand our present situation and human existence is to return to the beginning of our Western philosophical tradition, when not only history and natural philosophy have their beginnings, but political philosophy as well. It was a time of the crisis of the Greek *polis*. It was the time of Socrates and his questioning. Patočka points out that Socrates is not simply a historical figure that is of no interest to us today. To return to Socrates is to open up a dialogue with him *and* against him. Only through this renewed conversation, *can* we let Socrates to awaken us to problems that we have become blind to. To stage the Socratic fight is to recognise that to care for our soul means to care for truth and freedom of thinking by questioning presuppositions that we inherited from our tradition.

Socrates' endeavour is an attempt to confront the crisis of meaning, when traditional society is breaking down. The Socratic question is how to live a responsible life when old values cease to be meaningful and the new ones are not yet clear⁵. As Patočka points out, there is a plenty of evidence of Socrates' professed ignorance, of his 'knowing that he does not know'⁶. First and foremost, Socrates is a questioner (Patočka, 1996c: 308)⁷. Citing Cicero⁸, Patočka suggests that the real importance of the Socratic intervention is two fold: on the one hand, taking philosophy in the form of questioning into the market place to

⁵ For an interesting analysis of this transition, see Detienne, 1996.

⁶ The facticity of Socrates as a real living person is immaterial, although, Patočka prefers to think that he was a real historical person (Patočka, 1989 [1953]: 180; Patočka, 1996c: 308). Socrates, this ephemeral figure in the history of philosophy, is still demanding moral actions from us and his never-ending challenge to give reasons for our beliefs is a thread running through our philosophical tradition (Patočka, 1991: 8, 20). As Patočka notes, it is superfluous to argue about 'real' Socrates and if he existed and what he said or did or what Plato's own agenda cloaked in the Socratic garb was.

⁷ See also Patočka, 1991, 17.

⁸ "Socrates autem primus philosophiam e coelo devocavit et in urbibus conlocavit et in domibus etiam introduxit et coegit de vita et moribus rebusque bonis et malis quaerere" (M Tullii Ciceronis *Tusculanarum Disputationum Libri Quinque*, § 10.) See Patočka, 1977: 10; Palouš, 1990: 49.

inquire what is the good and the just; on the other hand, equally important is Socrates' elenctic and protreptic method, encouraging those he questions not only to reflect on the shaking ground of their most 'cherished' beliefs, but also to prompt them to *think* responsibly instead of parroting worn-out truisms. (Patočka, 1996h: 145)⁹.

Instead of seeing our present crisis as unique in its relativistic implications, we should realise that Socrates represents a similar predicament. Socrates starts asking questions without knowing the answer. His life is a testimony of possibility to recover human responsibility in the face of relativism and nihilism. He starts asking questions without the certainty of traditional ground. To follow Patočka's guide, we should learn from the Socratic intervention. We should start asking questions that, at the first glance, might appear naïve. Unless we start asking those basic questions, we will overstep what is problematic in the world of our living.

Patočka returns to the ancient Greeks and Socrates in three different ways: to consider that history begins when humans cease to accept mythological explanation of their reality and become aware that meaning is not given once and for all but it has to be searched for. Thus to overcome the "loss of meaning" is to accept that meaning "will no longer be for us simply a fact given directly in its integrity" (Patočka, 1996g: 60). The significance of Socrates' existence is his refusal to accept the "absence" of meaning by realising that new "meaning can arise only in an activity which stems from a searching lack of meaning" (Patočka, 1996g: 60-61). A quest for meaning can only be a way, constant questioning and thinking. There is no second, 'better reality,' be it a mythical world, or, later, the realm of Platonic ideas or the Christian heaven. We are finite human beings. But that does not mean that it is something negative. We can 'transcend' ourselves to confront the whole that seems to be threatening us. Meaning thus reached, will have to be constantly reaffirmed by thinking it through, by "seeking reasons and accepting responsibility for" it (Patočka, 1996g: 60). For Socrates, meaning can only be "in the mode of questioning because the question is built up on an awareness of the problematic nature of meaning" (Patočka, 1996a, 142). This is also Patočka's approach. To be open to questioning means to understand that philosophy is nothing else but "the radi-

⁹ See also Palouš, 1990: 49-50.

cal question of meaning based on the shaking of the naive, directly accepted meaning of life" (Patočka, 1996a: 143).

His second approach is to trace metaphysics and its present crisis to Plato who abandons Socratic open questions and his professed ignorance by covering over this openness with his metaphysical system of Forms. For Patočka, Socrates represents the open moment of philosophical inquiry into the meaning of the world as a whole, or – as he terms it – negative Platonism¹⁰. We need to restore this openness. And so, his third way is the one that, in a certain sense, underlies the first two as well, the care for the soul.

4. THE CARE FOR THE SOUL

It is Socrates' injunction to take care of our souls. This heritage was abandoned with the ascendancy of mathematical sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. We live in the shadow of that turn to the theoretical certainty by means of formalisation of all that-is¹¹.

The obvious problem is that formalised knowledge of natural science, based on mathematisation, is not easily transplanted into the sphere of our living. We cannot answer ethical questions by the simple equation $2+2=4$. The peculiar feature of moral problematicity necessitates the *pain* of the question. Ethical questions always relate to one's life, to the search for the *meaning* of one's being that cannot be expressed by laws or standards taken from the empirical domain of things (Patočka, 1996h, 179, italics in original). As Socrates explains to Euthyphro, when in disagreement, we cannot always use measurement to resolve our differences, as we can when we contradict each other about the sums, about what is the small and the large, or the heavy and the light. Modern science perfected this type of measurement by inventing indirect mathematisation. Now we can mathematically determine not only how something is small or large, we can measure also warmth and cold. Yet differences such as "the just

¹⁰ See, for example, Patočka, 1996d; Patočka, 1996e; Patočka, 2002c; Patočka, 2002b; Patočka, 1989 [1953]. Patočka's claim is not so straight forward. For him, Plato does not yet offer the metaphysics, as his *Letter VII* attests to.

¹¹ It is unfortunate that the translator of *Plato and Europe* rendered Patočka's term *jsoucno* (which is derivative from the verb 'to be') as existence. This terminology makes certain claims by Patočka rather misleading. E razim Kohák's choice to translate it as 'what-is' or 'that-is' is better. Patočka used the term *jsoucno* as a Czech equivalent to Heidegger's 'beings' (*Seiende*), (see the editor's note, Dodd, 1996: 163, note 6) hence to translate it as 'existence' implies a different understanding of the text.

and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad" cannot be measured then or now. Those are outside of scientific considerations, even though it might be advantageous to know how to approach those differences of opinion because they are those that "cause hatred and anger" (Plato, 1997b: 7b-d). Those differences of opinion apply to our existence. Modern knowledge is of no help. The only thing we can do is to follow Socrates' demand to take care of our soul, to be open to questioning and examine our beliefs constantly. Yet, to our modern sensitivities conditioned by science, the concept of the soul is problematic.

As far as scientific understanding of what-is is concerned, the soul is not a 'thing,' it cannot be converted into the mathematical equation to become a 'fact' that can be used to predict its future 'behaviour.' Therefore, it simply does not exist. For modern science, it is just a metaphysical dream. But does it mean that it is meaningless to talk about soul and the importance of taking care of it?

For different reasons than science presents, Socrates would agree, of course, that the soul is not a thing. For him, to care for the soul is to question inherited beliefs. It is to maintain a responsible attitude in the face of a loss of meaning that is brought about by changing times. For Socrates, to take care of the soul means to refuse to be defined by things and everyday pleasures. We can do that, of course, but then our life is not lived in freedom and we enter the crisis of meaning by accepting unquestioningly rules, prescriptions, passions and desires. Freedom and the care for the soul implicate each other.

The return to Socrates is to revive the original question of how we can live in a world where traditional beliefs are no longer credible, where the meaning is in crisis. It is to ask what to do when we face the overwhelming whole that threatens us without having comforting explanations, therefore realising that we might never be able to know it as the whole.

Patočka suggests that Socrates was the first philosopher to raise questions about our finite human knowledge. Socrates does not look for the ultimate answers. He is *not* searching for knowledge of "all things in the sky and below the earth" (Plato, 1997a: 18c, 19b, 23d). Socrates refuses also to teach Callias' sons the proper conduct because he admits that he is not an authority on "human and social" excellence. As Socrates points out, if they "were colts or calves", it would be easy. The specialist, such as a "horse breeder or farmer" would know what to do (Plato, 1997a: 20a-b). But humans are more compli-

cated. Socrates "understands that his wisdom is worthless" (Plato, 1997a: 23b). The only thing he could do is to question the common opinions of people, to show them that while they think they know something, they know nothing (Plato, 1997a: 21d). His only duty is to "go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old" to pay less attention and care to "body" or "wealth", and more to the care "for virtue" (Plato, 1997a: 31b) and the "best possible state of [their] soul" (Plato, 1997a: 30a-b)¹². Answers are never reached for the simple reason because that is not his aim. It is not because most of his interlocutors got tired or excused themselves by some pretext or another and leave, but Socrates "never promised to teach them anything and have not done so" (Plato, 1997a: 33b). As Socrates explains, the meaning of the Delphic oracle that he is the wisest man of Athens is that "human wisdom is worth little or nothing" (Plato, 1997a: 23b).

So, what kind of wisdom is he reputed to have? Socrates is clear about it: his is the "human wisdom" only (Plato, 1997a: 20d). He knows Apollo's message to him: "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless" (Plato, 1997a: 23b).

Yet how this type of human wisdom can be thought of along the lines of formalised scientific reasoning? We would want to say that formalised science *can* tell us something generalised about natural processes that will guide us in nature's exploration and its mastering by using knowledge to our advantage. But here is the crux of the matter. Scientific reasoning never pretends to be final truth on nature! It was always reasoning that allowed for the change of its axioms. Newtonian science is now a borderline case of Einstein's physics, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle admits our human participation in the scaffolding of our knowledge.

5. CONCLUSION

So, we must "shake the everydayness of the fact-crunchers and routine minds" (Patočka, 1996f: 136), to see beyond the simplistic understanding of scientific reasoning and its critique. We are finite human beings but we can

¹² For Socrates, "wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence brings about wealth and all other public and private blessings for men" (Plato, 1997a: 30a-b).

transcend our everydayness and realise that it is us, who constitute scientific knowledge. Yet it is also us who have forgotten that there is another way to think about the world and human life. The world is not for us to possess and there is more to life than possessions and pleasures. We need to start questioning those 'obvious' ideas that we take for granted. We need to realise that 'knowledge' is more than the formal scientific 'know-how'. There is a different order of understanding that cannot be reduced to mathematised certainty that is applied to inanimate nature. We need to start caring for the soul. We need to realise that we are finite human beings and our knowledge is finite as well. We can care for our being by understanding that our existence is very different from the 'existence' of things around us. We know – if we really think about it – that we need to lead our life. Our life is neither something given to us by the act of creation, nor is it a simple biological fact. We have to take upon ourselves responsibility for our life by transcending our material conditions. Following Socrates, Patočka is not offering some new transcendence, another 'perfect world.' It is this world we must live in and be responsible for. To be responsible means to be able to give an account of our lives. To act is to be who we want to be. So, we must act in such a way as to be responsible for each deed.

The Socratic wisdom is to realise that our finite human existence was, is, and always will be uncertain. But we should not despair. If we take care of our souls, if we always question what we believe we know, we will work towards the unity in our lives; that in itself is a reward. Socrates shows that questions that go beyond this world will be without answers. That is not for us to know. As he says at the end of *Apology*: "Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god" (Plato, 1997a: 42a).

Modern science sometimes forgets its own limits turning into scientism that pretends to discard the uncertainty of human situatedness, by replacing the old gods with the formal scientific knowledge based on mathematics. Modern scientism is a futile attempt to secure our knowledge by the means that can be successful in certain domains of nature but it cannot give answers to our human existence, which by its very nature is uncertain¹³.

¹³ Thank to Chris Grant for expunging my Slavic spirit from the English language.

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