

Patočkian Reflections on the *Life-World* and the Space of Manifestation

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In this paper I reflect on the meaning constitution in phenomenology and Jan Patočka's attempt to reconcile two different phenomenologies by proposing that neither Husserl nor Heidegger succeeded in harvesting the biggest discovery that phenomenology offers: the investigation of appearance as such. As Patočka notes, Husserl begins his investigations of meaning by showing the problematic nature of modern theories of knowledge and ends with a reflection on the life-world. For Husserl, the problem of epistemology is how to explain the connection between our thinking and the world. In the end, the space of meaning-constitution is in the immanence of the transcendental *ego*. Heidegger rejects the consciousness as the ground of meaning, but he also rejects the privileging of objects based on the model of mathematical modern science. In a reaction against Cartesian presuppositions of Husserl's investigations, he posits the world as the ground from where the ontological inquiry must begin. The world is the space where we let beings be as they are and what they are. This relatedness between *Dasein* and beings is the meaning-constituting horizon. In opposition to both, Patočka claims that they forget the most important discovery of Husserl's phenomenology, the appearance–manifestation–as such and concentrate on something already manifested.

Introduction

We live in a meaningful world. Yet what does it *mean* to say that a world is meaningful. To say that something is meaningful presupposes someone for whom things show themselves in a meaningful way. Yet, to say “showing to someone” is already problematic. A thing does not show itself differently to different people; or does it? Does each of us see a different thing or it is one thing that we see through different aspects? If it is the latter, can we *see* a thing in itself, as it is? Do we see things or we can only access ideas about them in our mind? Is a meaning of a thing in the thing or in us? This is the paradox of modern knowledge: how could we know things as they are in themselves if they are outside of our thinking. It begins with modern philosophy. Edmund Husserl tries to overcome this puzzle between things as they are and our knowledge about them by investigating phenomena, things as they appear to us. Nevertheless, questions do not stop here.

Does a study of the appearance of a phenomenon tell us anything about existing things we encounter in a world? How is it that we see a table, a bottle, a computer? Do we really understand when we say, following Martin Heidegger, that if there were no *Dasein*, there would not be a meaningful world? There would be φύσις [*phusis*], perhaps, but not the world. In other words, humans constitute the meaning of things around them as tables, chairs, mountains, bottles, as things meaningful to them. Yet what does this mean? How can we think of this meaning-constitution? Is it the sun that I see above me, or is it Apollo on his chariot cruising through the sky? Does Iris build a rainbow as a path between the world of humans and Gods; or is it a refraction of light caused by a sun shining on droplets of water? How can we think about our *historical situation* as leading to a difference in our understanding of the world?

For Husserl, our speaking, our language is the model for phenomenology.¹ We speak of a thing that reveals itself in different ways, in different perspectives. We speak of a thing that is not in front of us but we can still recall it through speech. Things can be unclear, far away from us, hidden partially from view. We are not always sure if what we see is exactly what we say about it but we can correct ourselves. A word, a sentence, a judgement encompass differences that we experience

¹ See Jan Patočka, “*Přirozený Svět' v Meditaci Svého Autora po Třiatřiceti Letech*”, in *Fenomenologické Spisy II: Co je Existence. Publikované Texty z Let 1965-1977, Sebrané Spisy Jana Patočky. Svazek 7* (Praha: Oikoymenh, Filosofia, 2009 [1969]), 304.

by reducing a thing to sameness. A table we experience is given to us in different perspectives, but the word “table” is not. Language makes understanding and communication possible. We can pass judgement about a thing we speak about even if we are not entirely sure if the judgement is certain, but we can clarify it by getting closer to a thing, by correcting our judgement or changing it when we realise that a thing is different from what we thought about it.

The insight of Husserl is to show how an object is given to us in many different ways, leading to his discovery of the empty and fulfilled intuition. As Patočka notes, for Husserl, an intuition is already meaningful. It is not a datum I “perceive”, it is the thing itself. Husserl’s investigations are already in the space of meaning, to use Stephen Crowell’s expression.²

In what sense? What is a meaning of a thing? Is the idea of a thing in my mind or is it an already meaningful thing in a world? Can we encounter things in a world or can we only be sure of them as *cogitata* in my *cogito* as René Descartes thinks. Does experience paint ideas of things on our minds, turning them into “*the object of thinking*”, thereby, as John Locke asserts, furnishing the mind through “the operations of our minds”³ with ideas? Or are things given to us in themselves through different manners of givenness, as Husserl claims?

As Patočka notes, Husserl’s phenomenological discovery is that a thing or its idea is not in my consciousness. Ideas are not like words, as Locke says.⁴ Our awareness of things is not on a model of a picture or a word. A thing is not “stamped” on our mind. It is we who constitute the meaningful thing through different acts of thinking (*cogitationes*). From this insight, in order to secure the safe ground of knowledge, through bracketing out the world and the epistemological egos, Husserl posits the transcendental *ego* as the space of meaning-constitution. As he explains, “transcendental life and the transcendental Ego cannot be born, only man in the world can be born...this means in itself that the Ego was from eternity”.⁵ Husserl thus inherited the Cartesian intensions for philosophy to be the science that provides the clarity of knowledge.

However, Descartes’ aspiration is not about objects and their givenness, but about the certainty of knowledge that he builds on his idea of the foundational structure based on the self-certainty of the *ego*, which from then on, was taken as consciousness.⁶

The idea of the “I” starts with Descartes. The Ancient Greeks and medieval thinkers speak about “αἴσθησις [aisthesis], φαντασία [phantasia], μνήμη [mneme]”⁷, but they never speak of the “I”. With Descartes, thinking becomes thinking of the “I”. The only certainty I have after I doubt everything. *Dubito ergo sum* leads to *cogito ergo sum*.⁸ I am certain that I doubt and, therefore, that I think; but because I am a finite human being, I cannot be certain of everything. I am certain about my *cogito*, my thinking, I am certain about my *cogitata*, my thoughts or ideas, but I cannot be certain about what my *cogitata* are about. Thoughts are only mediators between the world and my

² See Steven Galt Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Path Toward Transcendental Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

³ For all quotations above, see John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, Abridged ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924 [1690]), Book II, I, 1, 2, 4, 42-43.

⁴ Locke takes ideas and words as equivalent. As he says, “men have in their minds several ideas, such as are those expressed by the words, ‘whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness’, and others” (*Ibid.*, Book II, I, 1, 42.).

⁵ Edmund Husserl, “The Apodicticity of Recollection”, *Husserl Studies* 1985, 26.

⁶ Jan Patočka, *Úvod do Fenomenologické Filosofie*, ed. Jiří Polívka and Ivan Chvatík (Praha: ISE, Oikoyomenh, Edice Oikúmené, ve spolupráci s Archivem Jana Patočky, 1993), 85.

⁷ Perception, fantasy, memory.

⁸ Patočka, *Úvod*, 82.

thinking.⁹ The world is split between *res cogitans*, the thinking thing, and *res extensa*, the extended thing, in other words, things in the world.

The connection between *res extensa* and *cogitata* is secured through a thinking thing that exists. It is “I” that is a secure ground of knowledge. I must be certain about my own existence that I discovered when I reflected on my own process of thinking. This process of thinking maintains a thing I think about in its identity. Hence, knowledge of things is based on a thinking being who is in no doubt about its own thinking. In order to think about something, I have to be certain that I am thinking. Things I think about can be unclear, doubtful, confused; but I know that I cannot doubt that I think. And if I think, I exist. Where are else would thoughts be and who would be thinking them?

For Descartes, my thinking is indubitable; I have direct access to my thoughts, while I never have direct access to things in a world. Things are given to me through thinking, through ideas, which represent things that are outside of me. I have direct access to my thinking; indirect—through the ideas that I am thinking—to the things themselves.

The Cartesian theory is obsessed with knowing the world of objects, a world which can be built from its basic axioms. These secure axioms can only be secured in my thinking, in my reflection. The outcome of this procedure is that it forgets about both the things themselves and the one who thinks. It substitutes ideas for the world of things and oversteps the “I”. These ideas are “images” in our soul. This is the beginning of the idea of consciousness, of mind as a space of mental experiences. The ideas become real components of our mental processes. Mental process is composed of *cogitationes* (the acts of thinking), which are really part of my thinking.¹⁰ The “I” becomes the process of *cogitationes*. Each act of thinking [*cogitationes*] secures a thought [cogitatum] in its process. The point is there is no possibility to connect this flow of *cogitationes* to my historical situatedness.¹¹

In English empiricism, the connection between really existing ideas in my mental process and things in the world recedes even further. The real moments of my thinking are taken as primary. From this idea, modern psychology begins. These real moments of my mental process are interpreted on the model of physics¹² and taken as obeying the laws of causality. Another, later, take on this understanding is in John Stuart Mill, an understanding that Husserl names psychologism.

Husserl, while criticising psychologism, discovers a difference between our acts of judgement, that are particular, and the content of judgement, that is ideal. For Patočka, despite Husserl’s transcendental turn, the most important discovery of phenomenology is his recognition that phenomena show themselves and that it is important to inquire *how they show themselves*. As Husserl realises, there is a difference between “the *appearance and that which appears*”.¹³ We tend to focus on the appearance, forgetting that the thing is never given to us in its entirety. We think that a melody is appearance and really in our thinking process. However, it simply cannot be, because the tones pass away even though they are still a part of what I hear.

Patočka points out that even this insight overlooks appearing as such, which he wants to rethink. According to Patočka, different ways of manifestation belong to the thingness of a thing. It is a thing that is given to us in these different ways. If our judgement is not certain, or is controversial, it

⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29, 82.

¹¹ Patočka, “‘Přirozený Svět’ v Meditaci”, 270.

¹² Patočka, *Úvod*, 29.

¹³ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology: A Translation of Die Idee der Phänomenologie. Husserliana II*, trans. Lee Hardy, Edmund Husserl: Collected Works. Volume VIII (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 67, italics in original.

is because the thing we are speaking about is not clear to us in the first instance. It is not the “I” that is problematic or uncertain; it is the thing that we speak about that is not given to us in full.¹⁴

To reject transcendental phenomenology does not mean to reject phenomenology.¹⁵ Phenomenology is about manifestation as such. In order for us to encounter things and for things to reveal themselves, we need three aspects: things themselves, a thinking being, and the situation where they encounter each other. We need to think about things and how they manifest themselves; we need to think about historical human beings who enable things to manifest themselves so that they, historically situated human beings, can encounter them in a particular situation that is delimited by what is given to them through the things’ manifestation. We should realise that phenomenology is *not about* what already manifests itself, in other words, a phenomenon and how it shows itself, the eidetic moments of the noetic and noematic structure of a phenomenon. *Neither* is it a manifestation of a phenomenon in the psychic life of an individual. *Phenomenology is about the possibility of the manifestation of a world.* We cannot reduce this manifestation to transcendence in immanence. Likewise, manifestation precedes also *pragmata* that we use in our everyday dealings.

Heidegger is not interested in the meaning-constitution of the life-world; his question is different. However, his investigations brought to light *the importance of a questioner*. Heidegger transforms the life-world and the transcendental *ego* by shifting the focus from consciousness to a being living in a world.¹⁶ Very schematically, we can say that Heidegger recasts Husserl’s intentionality by substituting the world as the meaning-constituting horizon for consciousness. Heidegger also realises that categorial intuition is important; yet we need to reconsider the traditional understanding of categories. As he claims, categories can only define things but never human beings.

As Patočka suggests, the revealing of things cannot depend on us. Neither consciousness nor the disclosure of things as we deal with them in our everyday life is enough to account for the manifestation as such. This way of thinking overlooks the structure of appearing and explains meaning from the things already revealed. Patočka wants to show that it is not just a matter of a questioner and things, there must also be a third aspect, which is world that allows humans to understand themselves, things and the possibilities they have in each situation. As Patočka says, “a philosophy founded on *ego cogito cogitatum*, on self-knowing consciousness, comes to grief on the question of my situatedness in a world”.¹⁷ Humans are historical, so is the world. It is neither the *Geschichte* of Being that lets things be revealed or concealed for us, as later Heidegger will claim. Historical beings are always in a historical situation and *it is this disclosure* that will guide their understanding of a sun either as a chariot kept on its way by Apollo, or as the centre of the solar system.

So, what is phenomenology? For Patočka, phenomenology is a study of showing and manifestation, a study not only about what is but also how it shows itself. This study is at the same time a study of our experience, of how we encounter things. Human experience is nothing else but the way we encounter things through the different ways they show themselves to us to let us become familiar with them. So, how can we resolve this quandary of manifestation? Is meaning in things or is it in us? This is the old traditional question. Can we change our approach to it?

According to Patočka, phenomenology is not about already revealed things, as the tradition has it; but neither it is about consciousness as Descartes posited.¹⁸ Phenomenology is the study of showing

¹⁴ Patočka, *Úvod*, 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶ Patočka, “‘Přirozený Svět’ v Meditaci”, 310.

¹⁷ Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1998), 172.

¹⁸ Patočka, *Úvod*, 85.

and manifesting that is prior to things already manifested. It is a study of how this showing makes things to shine forth, to come out of nowhere so we can encounter them, and then making them dim on their way to disappear again. One of the questions is can there be a manifestation without a being who can encounter those things as they show themselves? Surely, there would be “things” in the world, even if we were not here, but no one could let them shine in their meaningfulness. For things to shimmer or to become lustreless there must be a being who can encounter them in the historical situation within the meaningful world.

However, the question remains: where can we “locate” this meaning? Is it, as in the modern tradition, *ego cogito* that leads to *ego sum*? As Patočka, notes, *ego sum* is correct, but it does not tell us anything about what *ego* is.

The problem is two-fold: for Descartes, the quest for certainty leads him to equivocate *ego sum* with *ego cogito*. At the beginning, *ego sum* is indubitable, but Descartes leaves *sum* behind for certainty of knowledge. The thinking *ego* replaces the being of an *ego*. What *ego* is we do not know; we only know that *ego* can doubt, think, desire, will. The modes of *cogito* become the indubitable starting point. *Sum* is there but out of the view. Moreover, my access is to my thinking only, not to things I think about. I know that I am thinking thoughts, but they cannot be clear because they are given to me not immediately but indirectly. Descartes, then in his search for certainty of knowledge, neglects even his discovery of thoughts and asserts that *cogitata* stand for extended things.

By contrast, for Husserl, *cogitata* are important. He investigates their modes of givenness. He shows how phenomena are given to us in different manners through empty or fulfilling intentions. We forget that we see things through different perspectives and modes and bypassing those aspects, we simply think that we see things as such. All his investigations are focused on showing, how we encounter phenomena and not things as such. Yet in his move to bracket the world, to perform the transcendental reduction, cutting the other side of the meaning constitution, he himself overlooks the importance of appearing as such. Husserl’s reduction proceeds in terms of a reflection in the immanent sphere. How did we get there? Patočka points out that our doubting, desiring, and willing cannot be reduced to investigate immanence because “I” can doubt, desire or judge, but “I” must doubt something. We must somehow take into account the obscurity of an object not given to us in its fullness. We cannot account for *cogitatum* without *a relation to a world*. We need the genitive and dative of appearance. Husserl would agree and yet, the transcendental reduction to the sphere of transcendental *ego* as a meaning constituting space remains.

According to Patočka, the structure “*ego–cogito–cogitatum*” is not primary, but it is based on the primordial structure of *ego sum*. In this regard, Descartes is right about the primordial understanding of *ego sum* as the basis of our understanding. Yet he oversteps this insight, going straight to *cogito*. *Sum* and *cogito* are not equivalent. Starting with *sum*, we realise that it cannot “contain” *cogitatio* that we supposedly discovered through reflection by analysing the immanent sphere. *Sum* is the original relation to a world.¹⁹

Heidegger’s rejection of the structure of *ego–cogito–cogitatum* leads him to reconsider the structure of *ego sum*. His phenomenological analyses about our engagement with the things we encounter in our everyday living leads him to consider human existence through his analysis of boredom and anxiety. As Patočka notes, it is not important how we name this mood. The point is that there are moments in our lives when things suddenly cease to have meaning. They are here, they are all around us, but their meaning is gone. We are thrown upon our own being, our *sum*. Our life-world, the things we use, the projects we have, the people we love, even our work to be finished somehow makes no more sense. We feel trepidation and anxiety about our own being. Modern psychology has cures for this and other types of conditions when we feel lost, but is an anxiety—an ontological

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107-08.

structure of our being in a world—something that we want to pathologise?²⁰ It is precisely, according to Heidegger and Patočka, this silent world, mute things and the meaninglessness of our projects that can bring us face to face with our own being, our own existence.

Things are here but they are suddenly meaningless; they fail to illuminate our existence; we are thrown upon our bare “*sum*”. Without understanding our own existence, our own being, we cannot understand others, things and the world. We need to have clarity about ourselves and our own engagement with things around us. Without human beings who understand their “*sum*”, no things and no world in its meaningfulness can shine, or grow dim eventually.²¹

Conclusion

Patočka begins his book *Přirozený Svět Jako Filosofický Problém* [The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem] with a claim that we live in “a double world”.²² We have two different understandings of the world: one scientific and one that we experience every day. The manner of reduction of the one understanding to the other is done in favour of the scientific world. We speak today of thinking and meaning as reducible to brain operations. Yet, are those two understandings separate and if yes, how? Do we not accept that the brain thinks and that a table in front of us is not solid but composed of electric charges? We accept scientific explanations as somehow more accurate and, then, despite accepting those explanations, proceed to put a cup of coffee on those swirling electric charges.

Husserl, in his last years, undertakes to approach systematically this discrepancy in our understanding of the world. As he shows, the life-world (Patočka’s natural world) is our primordial ground. We need to comprehend how modern natural science presupposes this primordial ground and then proceeds to use its formal schema to explain it away. Newton’s law of inertia or Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow’s “M-theory” as “a complete theory of the universe”²³ cannot explain the world of our living. Modern science, through formalization, reduces the life-world into a mathematical manifold and empties it of its meaning. $E=mc^2$ cannot help us in our everyday chores, worries or enjoyments. It can add to knowledge of scientists and technicians who then build some new gadgets that we can use in our world of living but the gadget itself will be either useful or not. It will not tell us anything about $E=mc^2$. Despite my knowledge that matter and energy are really same—those swirling electric charges again—I will still put my cup of coffee on the table. So will you.

There are, at least, two issues here: the emptying of meaning from our everyday living to scientific formulas and how science has changed the life-world. For Patočka, following Heidegger, the issue is that we cannot simply recover the *Lebenswelt* from oblivion. We have already constituted the life-world through the modern mathematical project of sciences and the essence of technology.

We are historical beings; hence, the meaning of a world cannot possibly be reduced to some common underlying meaning. There are different ways to understand things. I could not understand Heraclitus’ invitation to join him to sit next to his oven because Gods dwell there too. Likewise, Heraclitus would not understand that a brain thinks or that all things—such as pendulums, heavenly bodies and rocks—obey the law of gravity.

²⁰ See also Hannah Arendt, “Epilogue”, in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

²¹ Patočka, *Úvod*, 107, 09, 15.

²² Jan Patočka, “*Přirozený Svět Jako Filosofický Problém*”, in *Fenomenologické Spisy I: Přirozený Svět. Texty z Let 1931-1949, Sebrané Spisy Jana Patočky. Svazek 6* (Praha: Oikoymenh, Filosofia, 2008), 129, trans. by Erika Abrams.

²³ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (London: Bantam Press, 2010), 181.

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