

From Sophocles to Fincher: Fight Club and the History of Thinking

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Lubica:

The whole story is 'shown' from the inside. Even the starting shot, moving from the inside of narrator's head. So, the film is shown from (kind of) one POV, hence we are shown the other POV only at the end. But are we? What the film presents is a journey from one drone society to the next.

The narrator creates its own master for master his own life: it is presented as the third point of view, a view from the outside of his own life but based on the 'inside', effectively. And this POV is the master stripped of emotions. But Tyler is not the third person point of view. He is a narrator that cannot master his own life. He is as blind as the narrator. He accepts the scientific point of view of humans as biological beings only. Burning his own hand in order to face that there is no meaning in our lives because there is an uncaring god who does not give a damn about us. Well, why does there have to be some god to give meaning to one's own life. Are there only two possibilities? An uncaring god or a consumer society? Yet, pain reveals nothing more than the pain, a burnt hand. It does not supply meaning to someone who is blind to his own responsibility for one's own life. One drone society of consumers is supplanted by another. Drones without names, with burnt hands, following the orders from the leader they do not even know. Consumerism in different name. Violence is no substitute for meaning. It destroys even the last shred of meaning.

The question is, why is this film still seen as offering an alternative view, an alternative possibility, an alternative way of life. One thing it does not pretend to do is to comment on the meaninglessness of the beginning and the end. The whole narrative is, in fact, a closed loop, the POV of the closed off atom of the narrator. The film will stand in as the crisis of our times.

We are thrown into the world that was here before we were born and it will be here when we die. Although the present state of the world is not of our doing, we are still responsible for the world, nature, society, for ourselves.

Anita:

In the playing out of between Tyler Durden and the nameless narrator we see the two sidedness to the crisis that we currently face in our society. On the one hand, we have Tyler Durden the representative of our want to 'fight' against the reigning order that presents us as little more than numbered consumers and the nameless narrator stands in as representing that very consumerist number, 'the everyman', with the weight of meaninglessness hanging upon him. On the other hand, we see Tyler Durden stand in as the 'truth-teller', telling us that we are fighting for nothing, because we are, after all nothing important. And the narrator continues struggle to accept that he is nothing. We see in this dual role, the fight against the reigning order for our lives and the pointlessness of doing so, we are presented with little option.

I would suggest that this is a reflection of our current struggle with the meaninglessness of our lives, when conceived of as little more than biological beings in an infinite series. We cannot accept that we are merely consumers perfecting our material lives, yet simultaneously we think that there is no point anyway. We know what we are 'fighting' against, but not

know what we are 'fighting' for. In the end our struggle to regain our home within the world and find our lives important and meaningful, becomes itself meaningless, because the supposed 'truth' is that, in the end, our lives mean nothing.

We do not see the taken for granted assumption in our time that the world is a formalised whole that no longer leaves us with a role within it. We read the universal formalisation of the life-world as indicative of our own lives and not as a method through which we have come to interpret our world. We construct a formal conception of the world that operates perfectly without human agency. As Siegfried Kracauer and Jan Patočka have noted in different contexts, modern humanity becomes homeless in the world of abstractions that she has constructed for herself. Our life becomes an abstraction, a mere fiction, an ungraspable and elusive entity set against the supposed reality of the formal order. What is most familiar to us becomes the most distant from us.

It is no longer the case that we read nature as a formal system, but our formalisation has spread to our conception of the society in which we live. The social order has come to be understood as a world that operates without human agency. In a way this is unsurprising, as Ernst Cassirer has noted, humanity has always sought to explain both the regularities that she sees in the 'astronomical' order and the 'ethical' order. We have come to understand the 'astronomical' order as a formalised system and, hence, also the 'ethical' order. In *Fight Club* we see that the social world is ordered by the unnamed credit card companies, the inhumane car manufacturers and the malicious advertising companies. Who is responsible for the crisis of meaning experienced by the unnamed narrator, it is neither himself nor any nameable or understandable authority. Understanding the human society as a mechanistic operation of corrupt and corrupting forces, leaves us as a mere cog within that machine, but more importantly leaves us with no way out. Our only option becomes to follow another

dehumanising order, set in motion to destroy the malicious operations of consumerist society. We replace one formal order with another. The portrayal of society in *Fight Club* is indicative of the way we have come to understand ourselves.

Lubica:

In a certain way, this paper presupposes the idea of modern knowledge that encompasses the dialectical pull between two poles of being a human that became clear in the nineteenth century.¹ It is the tension between understanding, man, on the one hand, as a part of nature, and, on the other, as the ground of knowledge that explains nature.² From this problematic tension at the centre of modern knowledge flows another consequence: human beings understand themselves to be biological creatures that are subject to the laws of nature, as well as, seeing themselves as nature's rulers and conquerors. When did this idea of nature that can be mastered by finite human creatures become prevalent?

Michael Gillespie argues that we should understand modernity as an answer to the Christian nominalism of the fourteenth century based on ideas of William of Ockham who posited God as unknowable and not particularly benevolent. For Ockham, God "acts simply and solely as

¹ "S celým tímto proudem zdědil svůj hlavní problém, který bychom mohli nazvat velkým dialektickým problémem humanistického období: člověk zároveň v přírodě i jako překonatel přírody, člověk pochopitelný ze světa, zároveň však osmyslující a vykládající svět. V tomto významu lze říci, že je celé 19. století nějak hegelovské, zároveň humanistické a titánské" ((Patočka, 2004, p. p. 139)).

² This friction is also defined by Michel Foucault by the notion of "the empirico-transcendental doublet": "If man is indeed, in the world, the locus of the empirico-transcendental doublet, if he is that paradoxical figure in which the empirical contents of knowledge necessarily release, of themselves, the conditions that have made them possible, then man cannot posit himself in the immediate and sovereign transparency of a *cogito*; nor, on the other hand, can he inhabit the objective inertia of something that, by rights, does not and never can lead to self-consciousness" ((Foucault, 1994, p. p. 322)).

he pleases” and he owes nothing to man.³ According to Ockham, there is “no immutable order of nature or reason that man can understand and no knowledge of God except through revelation.” Thus Ockham unravels not only “the scholastic synthesis of reason and revelation and in this way [undermines] the metaphysical/theological foundation of the medieval world”,⁴ but he also threatens the possibility of mathematical nature. If we cannot know the world or God and if nature is not ordered in a way that can be understood by humans, we are left at the mercy of a mysterious, unpredictable God. Modernity, as Gillespie explains, “was the consequence of the attempt to resolve this conflict [created by nominalism] by asserting the ontic priority not of man or God but of nature”.⁵ It was not a victory of humanism or theology, but of natural science.⁶ However, if he is right, then the notion that the focus of our age is ‘man’ or, rather a human being, is a mistaken idea. On the contrary, it is the third option: nature, in terms of natural mathematical science. But this claim does not explain our question of understanding man as the ground of knowledge and a conqueror of nature.

Yet, if we reflect on the present, on the investigation into what is a human, the investigation is, indeed, in terms of her ‘physical nature’: biology, neuroscience, chemistry. To conduct an inquiry into ‘what human beings are?’ becomes an investigation of *what* a human is and not

³ “he is no man’s debtor” ((Gillespie, 2008, p. p. 22)).

⁴ (Gillespie, 2008, p. p. 22).

⁵ (Gillespie, 2008, p. p. 17).

⁶ “The idea of a modern age or, as it was later called, modernity, was part of the self-understanding that characterized European thought from the time of Bacon and Descartes. This idea differed decisively from the earlier because it rested on a revolutionary notion of freedom and progress. Alluding to the discoveries of Columbus and Copernicus, Bacon, for example, argued that modernity was superior to antiquity and laid out a methodology for attaining knowledge of the world that would carry humanity to ever greater heights. He knew that this idea was deeply at odds with the prevailing prejudices of his age that looked to the ancients as unsurpassable models of perfection, and he confronted this problem directly, asserting that while the Greeks were ‘ancients,’ this actually was not a reason to grant them authority. In his view they were mere boys in comparison to the men of his own time because they lacked the maturity produced by the intervening centuries of human experience. What underlay this changed evaluation of antiquity was not merely a new notion of knowledge but also a new notion of time not as circular and finite but as linear and infinite. Change was pictured as a continuous natural process that free human beings could master and control through the application of the proper scientific method. In this way they could become masters and possessors of nature and thereby produce a more hospitable world for themselves” (Gillespie, 2008, p. p. 5).

who she is. We investigate ourselves as part of nature, i.e., we investigate human nature; not in an ontological sense, not what makes a human be a human, not what is the humanity of humans; but a human being is reduced to a natural object that different scientific domains split into specific investigations. ‘Humans’ become part of nature, one natural ‘object’ among many others that different sciences can investigate by methods that we, humans, have developed. We are both, the ground of knowledge and the object of our own investigation. But we have ceased to be human in any other sense than a natural object.

Suddenly, to speak of our lives in no other terms than physicalist is proclaimed meaningless. Yet, to speak of life as meaningless is to rely on “an eye turned in no particular direction”,⁷ as Nietzsche would say. Only if we take life as a physicalist object lay open to investigation by different researchers, can we speak of the ‘meaninglessness’ of life as we live it.

That type of examination presupposes that lived life can be reduced to one unchanging unambiguous substrate, open to research by any and every observer, as, for example, atoms, blood flow or neurons could be.

Anita:

One example of the investigations of the ‘what is a human’ is psychology. I am talking not merely about a disciplinary domain of ‘psychologists’ who study the wrong thing, but of the historical development of a discipline that investigates the human being without considering human reason or experience. As a result of the sedimentation of the natural scientific attitude as the Objectivised interpretation of the life-world, we overlook that we cannot turn a method that abstracts from all of our experience back towards ourselves. In overlooking the absurdity of a natural scientific investigation of reasoning beings we reduce the human being to human nature (Husserl, 1970 (1935), p. 272).

⁷ (Nietzsche, 1989, pp. Book III, §12).

It is not that we necessarily understand the human agent in explicitly 'biological' terms, but that we turn our very experience into a mere cloak that floats over the top of the Objective structures that form the 'reality' of our social world or ourselves. The mainstream psychological approaches that start from the assumption that there is a measurable mean of humanity, along different dimension of traits, skills and abilities, more obviously places the human beings as a natural object that can be categorised into natural kinds using the methods of mathematical or formal natural science. However, even within the alternative approaches to psychology the outlook is still bleak. The main alternative we are presented with is, once again to eradicate the thoughtful human actor, and study the social structure that produces or constructs us. Even in the reactions against mathematical science we continue to investigate our society as a mechanistically ordered society, in which we have no place as personal thinking beings. In a way we can see the two sides of the problem in *Fight Club* the 'social construction' of the 'everyman', and the supposed reality of the 'biological being'. In either case, socially determined or biologically determined we are left without a thoughtful human actor and without a real possibility for the future, a real alternative to the current conception of humanity interpreted through formal mathematical science.

In adopting the natural scientific method to study Subjective human experience we understand our experience, which grounds the possibility of our investigations in the first instance, as an unreliable guide to knowledge, we turn the Subjective human experience into a mere cloak over the Objective structures of human experience (Husserl, 1970 (1935), p. 293). As Aron Gurwitsch (1945, p. 170) writes:

The 'belief in reason' is now replaced by all sorts of psychological and sociological sciences: the psychology of the unconscious, of behaviour, of suppressed desires and conditioned reflexes. The variety of sociologies is no less disconcerting – nor should we forget the sociological psychologies and the psychological sociologies. Formerly

man [sic] was considered to be *animal rationale*, a rational being; now he [sic] has become simply a vital being, not further qualified.

As psychologists adopting the impersonal natural scientific attitude towards ourselves we conceal human reason and experience further and misplace human agency and freedom altogether. Human reason and experience are the unseen and unnoticed ground to our investigations, yet without revealing human experience and reason we lose our ability to talk about ourselves. In psychology, by overlooking human experience and reason, we lose sight of both our ability to account for our own claims to know and ourselves.

Lubica:

For Patočka though, even if mathematical nature was a fact and not only a hypothesis, even if it were irrefutably true that what matters to nature is only the species, the whole, the series; that an individual is only a fleeting instance of the series, a means towards the preservation of the species – despite all this, our life is not something general, it is uniquely our own.⁸ To speak of meaninglessness of life is to confuse the third person⁹ point of view description of life as a physicalist object with our own life. Lived life depends on the situation we are in. Life is always our own and it is meaningful to us. Our own life is impossible to describe from the outside. It is not an unchangeable object on a par with objects that science investigates is; it is always meaningful to us as the life we live, who we are.

We know that our life is not something that can be thought outside of us living it. We are finite. The awareness that stems from the question of our finitude, the question ‘whence – to where?’ is both all-embracing and negating. It is an all-embracing question, because to accept that to know all is impossible is *docta ignorantia*, ignorance; a knowing of not-knowing as Socrates professed at the beginning of philosophy. It is the acknowledgment of the

⁸ (Patočka, 2004, p. p. 145).

⁹ I.e., a disinterested observer – Nietzsche’s eye turned in no particular direction.

impossibility of knowing everything. This awareness is simultaneously humble and immense. The magnitude of this awareness, this realisation of never being able to know all, is realised in gaining a new relation to ourselves – from the perspective of incalculability and infinity.¹⁰ As Patočka writes, “humans are a relation that relates to itself, a relation between eternity and time, individuality and universality, contingency and necessity, etc.” Hence, “reflection derives from the fact that we are not initially given to ourselves but rather must seek ourselves”.¹¹

Our lives are a journey from birth to death, two outer limits that circumscribe human life. It is the interplay between our finitude and incalculability, therefore, unknowability of the whole. Yet it is also a realisation of our relation to the whole, to the world around us, to others. This reflection can bring to the fore that the world is not only a collection of things that, one day, we will be able to know; it is an awareness that we are not one object among many others, that we are not *partes extra partes*, that we are not only biological creatures. We are more because we are concerned for ourselves, others and the world. We know that from the perspective of natural science we are a bunch of atoms but we also know that it is not who we are. We are also responsible creatures because of our relation to the world. We know that neither will we be able to master nature nor our own lives. Mastery of our lives presupposes not only knowledge but also the position of an outsider. Neither does apply to our own lives. However, it still does not mean that our lives are meaningless. Despite their good intentions, humans are strangers in the world, and their actions can never be transparent to them. As Haemon says to Kreon, his father, “Whoever thinks that he alone possesses intelligence, the

¹⁰ “I kdyby stokrát platilo, že přírodě záleží toliko na druhu, na celku, na souboru, jednotlivec že je pouhým nástrojem – život je přece pouze náš vlastní. A tak je uvědomění, jež vyplývá z otázky ‘odkud – kam’, zároveň celkové a záporné, je to celková otázka, druh vědění nevědění, *docta ignorantia*”.¹⁰ Je to zároveň chudé a nesmírné. Ta nesmírnost se projevuje v tom, že jí získáváme nový vztah k sobě – z hlediska nezměrnosti a věčnosti” ((Patočka, 2004, p. p. 145)).

¹¹ (Patočka, 1996, p. p. 111).

gift of eloquence, he and no one else” is wrong. “I tell you, ...it’s no disgrace for a man, even a wise man, to learn many things and not to be too rigid”.¹²

As Patočka notes, human life is a journey from unknown to unknown, from darkness to darkness, from night to night: “I wasn’t – I am – I will not be”.¹³ The finiteness of our lives is kept within bounds of birth and death. Those limits are not possible to transgress.¹⁴ Those two boundaries are irreplaceable, they are ours only. They are by definition outside of the habitual ways in which society functions. Our existence is not interchangeable with any other. Species might be a legitimate framework for scientific inquiries; it is meaningless in terms of our existence. Each existence is unique.¹⁵ But if existence is unique, how can we reflect on human life if we cannot observe it as an ‘object’, as something that we can describe the way that others can understand it.

For Patočka, one way to show the typicality of our lives is to draw on literature. For him, characters in Dostoyevsky, Faulkner or Josef Čapek are different ways to reflect on the humanity of humans. However, the Greek tragedy is, perhaps, the most important source of reflection for, at least, two reasons. Tragedy stands at the beginning of our Western thinking and it resembles our era when the old values are becoming obsolete and the new ones are not clear.

However, tragedy is something else. As Patočka explains, for Aristotle, the power of tragedy was already opaque. He read it through his (and Plato’s) philosophical understanding of gods. For Aristotle, gods are not only immortal as they were for mythical people; they become infinite and atemporal. In other words, they could be understood through the power of Ideas, through geometry. There is no possibility of conflict because the threatening night of tragedy

¹² (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 785-796 [pp. 795-796]).

¹³ (Patočka, 2004, p. p. 141). See also (Patočka, 2002 [1974], p. p. 300).

¹⁴ (Patočka, 2002 [1974], p. p. 300).

¹⁵ See also (Arendt, 1998 [1958], pp. pp. 8, 9, 247).

is flattened by Aristotle to knowable world of the day. Aristotle collapses epic and tragedy. For Aristotle, the epic is the ground of tragedy and Homer is a poet *par excellence*.¹⁶

Yet tragedy is not epic, as Patočka points out. Epic can be written or read but the power of tragedy comes through the interaction between the played spectacle and spectators. They must become involved in the unfolding story. Epic presupposes a world that is common to the poet and his listeners/readers. It is a harmonious moral world, where the powers of day and night balance each other. Achilles' rage against Hector has to bend in front of gods. Priam is given the body of his dead son. Homer's epos is an expression of the mythical understanding of the world where gods are part of it. Tragedy begins when the harmonious moral world becomes a question. Tragedy is impossible to understand without the participation of spectators. It is through *ἔλεος* (*éleos*) and *φόβος* (*phobos*) that they become aware of their blind wandering, about the impossibility of knowing what will come next in their own lives. As Patočka points out, tragedy's "meaning must be realised through participating in the drama, it has to be implemented, performed, created and what is undecided has to be decided".¹⁷

According to Patočka, Aristotle posits that in the catastrophe of the world there is something which remains constant: it is *ἔλεος* (*éleos*) – sorrow-pity/compassion (*lítost-soucit*) and *φόβος* (*phobos*) – fear-horror/dread (*strach-hrůza*).¹⁸ In our participation in the world's drama, we feel fear for characters when there is a danger awaiting them, which may lead to horror that is impossible to imagine in our lives; but we also feel pity and compassion with others who are stricken by misfortunes following their blind wandering in the world. As

¹⁶ (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, p. p. 351).

¹⁷ (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, pp. p. 350, italics in original).

¹⁸ (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, p. p. 352).

Oedipus learns from a messenger, he simply does not know what he is doing.¹⁹ *Phobos* is the horror when we realise that something similar can happen to us. We simply do not know everything, we are finite human beings and only gods can know all. *Éλεος* is not only the human feeling of empathy with others and with the wretchedness of their situation; it is also the recognition that this can happen to us as well: we can also undergo a catastrophe that is not necessarily of our doing.

It is through understanding the horror in front of their eyes that spectators – as participants – can confront the unknowability of life. In tragedy, *phobos* and *éleos* lead to *κάθαρσις* (*katharsis*) – purification, releasement, liberation [očista, uvolnění, osvobození].²⁰ Tragedy is like an “Athena’s polished shield”,²¹ that helps to deflect the horror of the situation without crushing them. Tragedy is *solvitur ambulando*, it is letting spectators walk through the horror and experience *éleos* because they are watching it from a distance.

As Patočka’s reflection on Sophocles’ tragedies about Labdakos’ progeny shows, tragedy is this play of the horror of not knowing, of the human blindness that leads to wandering into the tragic end without being fully responsible for it. It is showing that our lives are not possible to master because we are part of the whole. When the honest shepherd thinks that he is kind to a child, saving him from certain death, he transgresses the law of gods. He is as blind as Oedipus himself. Gods know that Oedipus is unruly, that he is a threat to what

¹⁹ “My boy, it’s clear, you don’t know what you’re doing” ((Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 1105 [p. 1217])).

²⁰ (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, p. p. 350).

²¹ Likewise, the role of drama is acknowledged by Kracauer, “The moral of the myth is, of course, that we do not, and cannot, see actual horrors because they paralyze us with blinding fear; and that we shall know what they look like only by watching images of them which reproduce their true appearance. These images have nothing in common with the artist’s imaginative rendering of an unseen dread but are in the nature of reflections. Now of all the existing media the cinema holds up a mirror to nature. Hence our dependence on it for the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life. The film screen is Athena’s polished shield” ((Kracauer, 1997 [1960], p. p. 305)).

constitute the humanity of humans. Sophocles shows this in the scene when Oedipus rages against Tiresias:

Oedipus

... You,

you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone!

You want talk? Nothing moves you?

Out with it, once and for all!

Tiresias

You criticize my temper. . .unaware

of the one *you* live with, you revile me.²²

Oedipus stops at nothing unless he “solve[s] the mystery of [his] birth.”²³ Not even Jocasta’s plea to stop the search will show Oedipus his own doom. The blindness to his origins, his wandering into the horror of knowing what he should not know is his destiny. He is oblivious to everything except his own drive: “I must know it all, must see the truth at last.”²⁴

Tragedy is a play about a repeated rising and falling of human lives; it is showing the blindness of the human condition, of human hubris to think that a human can know all.

Antigone acknowledges this blindness when she says, “Raking up the grief for father three times over, for all the doom that’s struck us down, the brilliant house of Laius”.²⁵ But it is not Antigone’s subjective point of view. It is playing out human blindness for all to see.

As Patočka notes, in our times, the more effective and deeper science of the world becomes, the more subjective everything we experience in the world is perceived. We have the unified

²² (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 380-385 [p. 178], italics in original).

²³ (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 1160 [p. 1222]).

²⁴ (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 1169 [p. 1222]).

²⁵ (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 943-950 [p. 103]).

natural scientific world (artificial and constructed) but we have no unity of the moral world. Our moral world is not natural and the natural world is not moral.²⁶ So, speaking of the classical epic that traditionally transmitted the moral code of society, Patočka suggests that by revisiting Aristotle's discussion of the epic's form we can borrow from his categorisation of drama in order to understand the moral crisis of our times.

Tragedy for the Ancient Greeks was playing out this human blindness and wandering. As Patočka notes, contrary to Aristotle's codification of tragedy as an extension of the epic, tragedy cannot be staged as something already finished and closed, but must be played out for the audience, which participates in the process of resolution of the drama brought about by human blindness. Tragedy, in its innermost sense, brings out this possibility of understanding that we always live in the world where meaning is in crisis. The basis for our understanding of this situation is *phobos* and *éleos*.

Our understanding of our place in the world can follow two paths. In the first, we explain the meaning of our own being in the world as something worldly, concerned with material values and ordinary life. Meaning, then, is explained as preceding us, and is accounted for by describing things *in* the world – as if the meaning of our lives could be reduced to this 'thingness'. Modern science is an example of this belief. We propose theories that can explain the regular behaviour of certain entities in nature. These theories then circumscribe framework for the investigation and we go on to test these theories and hypotheses by setting up ideal situation where the experiments take place. No horror or pity is relevant to our search for the proof of gravity or the 'behaviour' of particles. Likewise, we observe the behaviour of certain group of people and posit the most probable explanation for certain behaviour. We propose the explanation, construct probable categories, atomising, simplifying

²⁶ (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, pp. pp. 355-356).

and freezing characteristics that can interpret the behaviour of anybody and everybody and then, in turn, use it to explain the future behaviour of everybody. Once this conceptual knowledge of human characteristics is accepted, people go on and recognise themselves according to these categories. Similarly, in the process of categorising different forms of art, horror and pity are dissolved into ideal formalised categories that suppose to explain the formal characteristics of the form labelled as drama. We flatten lived experience of horror and pity into concepts that we can then think outside of our living. As Patočka notes, “conceptual knowledge, as a mathematical science – this radical objectification of reality – becomes absolutely dominating in our culture”. This understanding of nature and us as part of nature “permeates schooling from the primary level”. Through the export of technologies around the world, this understanding “penetrates everywhere and it is impossible for scientific methods and procedures not to influence everything, even something as radically different as activities, such as art work”.²⁷

Tragedy can be thought of differently. We can learn from it. So, secondly, we can think of the meaning of the world and our situation therein as something that we can only reach by transcending our finite situation, through reflection, confrontation and self-understanding. As Sophocles reminds us at the end of *Antigone*: “the mighty words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate”.²⁸ We are finite creatures, dependent and dwelling in the world, but *we can* reflect on meaning. Not even ‘the mightiest among us’ know the meaning of the all. We are no gods. Meaning is never final, given unproblematically in all its integrity; there is no deity that can secure it for us. Yet, this is not to resign ourselves to whatever comes. To realise our finitude and problematicity of our lives is to acknowledge that for humans there is no possibility to reach a final meaning as if we can stop living, as if we can observe, describe,

²⁷ (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-b, p. p. 306).

²⁸ (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 1468-1469 [p. 1128]).

categorise our own life; there is no new ground where the human search for meaning can peacefully rest, content with meaning reached. The search for meaning can only be a process of reflection and questioning that is never finished. As Sophocles concludes with the chorus, we can only participate in the drama, reflect and learn from hubris of the mighty who forgotten that we always blindly wander in the world “and at long last these blows will teach us wisdom”.²⁹ Wisdom is to know that our knowledge is partial and that we need to accept the problematicity of life.

Once we accept that the old naïve belief of some eternal meaning of the world does not exist, or that there is no meaning that precedes us, the perennial search for meaning will be a way through which we confront *problematicity*. To concede that meaning is never given is to avoid disappointment over a new crisis. To recognise the problematicity of a situation is already a movement towards its clarification. Once we embark on this road, we can never return to the unproblematic understanding of our situation. As Socrates said, the unexamined life is not worth living,³⁰ so, the meaning of the world is coterminous with the meaning of one’s own life.

The meaning of life and human responsibility are impossible to *think* if the basis of our investigation is couched in the formalised scientific explanation that can only account for things *in* the world. To understand life as some kind of entity existing *in* the world and reduced to the biological substrate means that we forget that it is we who *are* that life. Life is not *something* given to us once and for all. Life is not a direct biological fact that natural science can account for. The biological aspect of an ‘organism’ is only a part of what it means to live. To think about the meaning of life is to recognise that our lives are not something in the world, unchanging and open to investigation by formalised knowledge, as

²⁹ (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 1469-1470 [p. 1128]).

³⁰ (Plato, 1997, p. 38a).

trees or rocks are. To think about our life does not allow for the scientific perspective of a 'disinterested observer'. Life is always our own; therefore, we must be responsible for the way we live. In that sense, science is incapable of accounting for the *meaning* of life.

It is in this sense that drama in art, literature and film can give us access to the drama of other lives and lead us to reflect upon our own. We might take up that challenge; or we might refuse it and retain the belief that art is just an escape from reality.

Anita:

In *Fight Club*, we see a 'fight against' a nameless and faceless social order to regain ourselves as nothing more than a biological being, 'a hunter', it does not give us an option, it does not give us hope and it does not show that we can change. Only by understanding ourselves as thoughtful human agents who are able to be responsible for our understanding, thinking and acting in the world can we rethink the natural scientific attitude turned back towards human experience and open up new possibilities for the future. We are the only ones who can change the situation, but it is only by recognising that we can meaningfully dialogue with others that we can re-interpret our current understanding of the world in order to create different possibilities for the future. In short, we need to refuse to accept the current understanding of ourselves as biological beings.

As Raymond Tallis (1999, p. 15) writes, 'it is not the effort at unification that is at fault but the choice of framework within which the unification is attempted'. I would like to suggest that we need to start thinking about the direction in which the universalised natural scientific attitude is taking us in and we need to recover the importance of the critical attitude so that we can question the current acceptance of this interpretation of the life-world.

The natural scientific interpretation of human experience in our current historical situation is a problem because it strips our lives of meaning. We need to think about what we are doing, so that we can return human reasoning and experience to being relevant and important to our lives, and in order to rethink the flattening out of everything to a purely formal conception of the world, which drains our life of meaning.

Our lives are not arbitrary in ‘the big scheme of things’ and we are not determined by forces outside of ourselves, either social or biological. Our lives are meaningful for us and we are reasoning beings. As Hannah Arendt notes:

The critical position stands against both of these. It recommends itself by its modesty. It would say: ‘Perhaps men, though they have a notion, an idea, of truth for regulating their mental processes, are not capable, as finite beings, of *the* truth. (The Socratic: ‘No man is wise.’) Meanwhile, they are quite able to inquire into such human faculties as they have been given—we do not know by whom or how, but we have to live with them. Let us analyse what we can know *and* what we cannot’ (Arendt, 1989, pp. p. 33, italics in original).

It is only by understanding ourselves as reasoning beings who share the world that we can return the human world to a being a familiar place where we can understand and be understood by each other, rather than understanding of ourselves as isolated, alienated and trapped vital beings for whom the meaning of life is elusive or absent. We need to think about what we do, rather than fighting against a nameless authority through another nameless authority.

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