

## Patočka's *Solvitur Ambulando*: Sophocles' Tragedies on Labdakos' Progeny

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Chorus:

Your life's in ruins, child – I wonder. . .  
do you pay for your father's terrible ordeal?

Antigone:

There – at last you've touched it, the worst pain  
the worst anguish! Raking up the grief for father  
three times over, for all the doom  
that's struck us down, the brilliant house of Laius.<sup>1</sup>

Chorus

Wisdom is far the greatest part of joy,  
and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.  
The mighty words of the proud are paid in full  
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last  
these blows will teach us wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 he

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<sup>1</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 943-950 [p. 103]).

<sup>2</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 1466-1470 [p. 1128]).

<sup>3</sup> “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)).

<sup>4</sup> 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).

pleases” and he owes nothing to man.<sup>5</sup> 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”,<sup>6</sup> 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”.<sup>7</sup> It was not a victory of humanism or theology, but of natural science.<sup>8</sup> 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 *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.

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<sup>5</sup> “he is no man’s debtor” ((Gillespie, 2008, p. p. 22)).

<sup>6</sup> (Gillespie, 2008, p. p. 22).

<sup>7</sup> (Gillespie, 2008, p. p. 17).

<sup>8</sup> “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).

Suddenly, to speak of our lives in 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”,<sup>9</sup> 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.

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.<sup>10</sup> To speak of meaninglessness of life is to confuse the third person<sup>11</sup> 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 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.<sup>12</sup> 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”.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> (Nietzsche, 1989, pp. Book III, §12).

<sup>10</sup> (Patočka, 2004, p. p. 145).

<sup>11</sup> I.e., a disinterested observer – Nietzsche’s eye turned in no particular direction.

<sup>12</sup> “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*”.<sup>12</sup> 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)).

<sup>13</sup> (Patočka, 1996, p. p. 111).

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 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”.<sup>14</sup>

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”.<sup>15</sup> The finiteness of our lives is kept within bounds of birth and death. Those limits are not possible to transgress.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.

Tragedy, as Patočka understands it, is a bridge between myths and philosophy. For Patočka, in a dialogue with Aristotle and against him, tragedy is already a question posed by humans to

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<sup>14</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 785-796 [pp. 795-796]).

<sup>15</sup> (Patočka, 2004, p. p. 141). See also (Patočka, 2002 [1974], p. p. 300).

<sup>16</sup> (Patočka, 2002 [1974], p. p. 300).

<sup>17</sup> See also (Arendt, 1998 [1958], pp. pp. 8, 9, 247).

themselves: the question about human existence. By contrast, in myth there is no possibility of a question. Everything is as it always was. Why is because of gods. Fire is because someone went to the forest and met some god who passed on a burning log and we have fire. The thunderstorm is a sign of Zeus' anger. The question of 'why something is as it is' is impossible to advance. The present is always already answered by the past, by the mythical stories.

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 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*.<sup>18</sup>

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".<sup>19</sup>

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-soucít*) and *φόβος* (*phobos*) – fear-horror/dread (*strach-hrůza*).<sup>20</sup> 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 Oedipus learns from a messenger, he

<sup>18</sup> (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, p. p. 351).

<sup>19</sup> (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, pp. p. 350, italics in original).

<sup>20</sup> (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, p. p. 352).

simply does not know what he is doing.<sup>21</sup> *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. *ἔλεος* 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].<sup>22</sup> Tragedy is like an “Athena’s polished shield”,<sup>23</sup> 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 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.<sup>24</sup>

Oedipus stops at nothing unless he “solve[s] the mystery of [his] birth.”<sup>25</sup> Not even Jocasta’s plea to stop the search will show Oedipus his own doom. The blindness to his origins, his wandering into

<sup>21</sup> “My boy, it’s clear, you don’t know what you’re doing” ((Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 1105 [p. 1217])).

<sup>22</sup> (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, p. p. 350).

<sup>23</sup> 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)).

<sup>24</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 380-385 [p. 178], italics in original).

<sup>25</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 1160 [p. 1222]).

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.”<sup>26</sup>

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”.<sup>27</sup> 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 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.

Ultimately, Oedipus, despite his victory over the Sphinx and despite the appearance to the contrary, is not the saviour of Thebes. Rather, he is the city’s greatest polluter, endangering its very existence. He violates communal and divine laws by killing his father and marrying his mother. No matter what his intentions are, he simply does not know what he is doing, because the absolute meaning of the world is known only to gods. He is privy only to the meaning of *his* acting in the world, which is, by definition, particular. The total situation is foreclosed to him. His intentions are good but humans wander blindly. They can trip over at any time into tragedy that is impossible to predict, *because* human understanding can only be partial. As Sophocles puts it in *Oedipus at Colonus*, expressing the wisdom of his times, “Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best thing is for life, once it has appeared, to go back as quickly as possible whence it came”.<sup>29</sup> Hence, *éleos* and *phobos* lead to the recognition that our life will always be opaque to us. As Kreon acknowledges, I am “a rash, indiscriminate fool! Wailing wreck of a man, whom to look to? where to lean for support?”<sup>30</sup> I thought I know but gods showed me otherwise. In the end, “whatever I touch goes wrong – once more a crushing fate’s come down upon my head”.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Oedipus The King, 1169 [p. 1222]).

<sup>27</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 943-950 [p. 103]).

<sup>28</sup> (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-a, pp. pp. 355-356).

<sup>29</sup> (Sophocles, 1947, pp. Oedipus at Colonus, 1224-1226).

<sup>30</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 1459-1464 [p. 1127]).

<sup>31</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 1465 [p. 1127]).

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 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”.<sup>32</sup>

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

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<sup>32</sup> (Patočka, 2004 [1966]-b, p. p. 306).

fate”.<sup>33</sup> 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, 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”.<sup>34</sup> 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,<sup>35</sup> 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 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.

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<sup>33</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 1468-1469 [p. 1128]).

<sup>34</sup> (Sophocles, 1984, pp. Antigone, 1469-1470 [p. 1128]).

<sup>35</sup> (Plato, 1997, p. 38a).

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.

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