

Judgement, Responsibility and the Life-World

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The Perth workshop “Judgement, Responsibility and the Life-World” aimed to address a philosophical account of the nature of self-responsibility as a critical, self-reflective and ethical practice which is required to correct the increasingly value-free formalism of knowledge. The idea was to base his concept of self-responsibility on the critical analyses of the philosophical contributions of Edmund Husserl and Jan Patočka, both of whom argued that the idea of self-responsibility must take into account the notion of the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*), the world in which we live.¹ The point is to argue that both Husserl’s and Patočka’s visions represent a startlingly modern and relevant assessment of the current critical situation of our technologically advanced but morally challenged and unevenly developed human culture.

Introduction

The critique of knowledge is nothing new. However, Edmund Husserl’s project is not simply the critique of knowledge but the critique of a formalized knowledge which has forgotten its origins in the life-world. When we dismiss the life-world, the assumption that formalised knowledge can solve the problems of society becomes prevalent and this leads to a crisis of culture. Jan Patočka, following Husserl, suggests that we live in a double world: (1) the world of formalised nature stripped of everything subjective and (2) the everyday imprecise world. Our understanding of the world is turned up-side-down. The everyday world is explained in terms of scientific models that were originally constructed by idealisation of our world but now become the measure of it. Severed from the everyday world, formal judgement then leads to objective knowledge bereft of everything human. Yet this formal knowledge does not relate to our everyday concerns.² Patočka suggests that unless we acknowledge the life-world as the starting point where formalism begins then nothing will change. Both Husserl and Patočka argue that we must reflect on the problematic nature of formalised knowledge expressed in the belief in the superiority of abstract models over human judgement.

One pertinent example of the problem with formal knowledge substituting our everyday experience of the world might be the global financial crisis. The current global financial crisis shows the way in which a mode of formalism embodied in systems of financial transaction can become isolated from the life-world in problematic ways: not only (1) in the obvious sense of being removed from the real valuation of companies on which actual wealth depends, but also (2) in the way that we understand it to be possible to govern and manage investment behaviour, company operations and even individual performance through structured and systematic models. Thus the economic system not only functions mechanistically, but is also divorced from any real sense of personal responsibility. Yet, we take the economic system as a more or less accurate description of decisions

¹ See Patočka, Jan. *Přirozený Svět Jako Filosofický Problém*. Praha: Československý Spisovatel; Patočka, Jan. "Přirozený Svět' v Meditaci Svého Autora po Třiatřiceti Letech." *Přirozený Svět Jako Filosofický Problém*. Praha: Československý Spisovatel, 1992a, 167-251 and Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. David Carr. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy. Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1970.

² Patočka, “Přirozený Svět' v Meditaci”, 9.

we make about money, not as a formal model that cannot speak of human decisions. We invest mechanistic models with pretend life-world legitimacy. We forget that these formal models stripped of the actual authenticity of living in the world. We, thereby, naively accept the mechanisms as more “real” than our relationships with others in the world of our living. In this way, we construct the formalised models that we then apply back to the life-world, as if the life-world was frozen in time, perfectly predictable and uniform. We delude ourselves that economic models can give us solutions to the real worldly problems. In this way, we lose a sense of real worth of things as well as our labour and increasingly operate within a framework oriented to the maximisation of notional gain as the only goal. Furthermore, individuals see pure competition and financial reward as the only criteria governing success. Mechanism replaces real human relationships.

Focusing on the failure of judgement that formal models give rise to—especially evident in the current financial crisis—we intended to develop a new narrative of the relation between judgement and responsibility; one that is applicable in the sphere of knowledge as well as in ethics: a narrative where responsibility and judgement go together. We contend that connecting the responsibility and judgement gives us a critical edge in relation to the present day crisis, not only in the sphere of economics and the environment but also in other facets of everyday life.

Everywhere we see the replacement of the capacity to judge with the capacity merely to calculate. By using computer models, for example, we reduce human interactions to a mechanistic model and assume that perfect causality also applies to humans living in the world. Responsibility and judgement are misplaced by mechanism. By way of a preliminary illumination of the problem with replacing responsibility and judgement with mechanism, we propose returning to a concept of knowledge which requires self-responsibility and self-critique.

Self-responsibility and self-critique have been themes in philosophy since Socrates endorsed the demand to “know thyself”. In the modern philosophical tradition, however, self-critical reason, a reason which gives the law to itself, has been at the very centre of the practice of both epistemology and ethics. In the twentieth century, the European phenomenological philosophers Husserl and Patočka brought new clarity and a sense of urgency to the need for critical thinking and responsibility. Speakers in the workshop worked through Husserl’s and Patočka’s accounts of knowledge, linking these to judgement and responsibility and presenting their accounts as coherent and relevant theory for the present age.

At the heart of our discussion is Husserl’s concept of the life-world. Husserl’s conceptualisation of the “life-world” is central to the analysis of the nature of formal knowledge and the manner in which formalised knowledge tied to technological advances have shaped modern culture. Husserl claimed that in order to understand responsibility for knowledge, formalised or everyday, we must acknowledge that all our claims have their starting point in the life-world. Hence, Husserl’s stress on responsibility is intimately tied to his discovery of the importance of the life-world. This insight has important implications for philosophical reflection on the role of formalised knowledge in contemporary culture.

Husserl acknowledges the extraordinary dominance and success of the natural sciences based on their rigorous application of theory, the discovery of the infinity of knowledge, and the use of a certain formalistic method, especially in his seminal work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. However, we argue that the nature of the scientific attitude has not been reflected on sufficiently since the time of Husserl’s writing. Natural science has developed into a kind of applied technicity which increasingly dominates and controls all aspects of life. Hence, we feel it is timely to return to Husserl’s discussion of science.

Husserl stresses the idea of responsibility in connection with the idea of infinite tasks. The idea of the infinite task—which can never be achieved but must always be revised through the cooperation

of many thinkers—is at the heart of Husserl’s understanding of responsibility. Only by exposing the architecture of our argument, can we present them to others and allow them to participate in the further development of knowledge. However, we need to refer back to our starting point, the life-world, to ground our insights and understanding. To fail to do so takes us into the domain of formal thinking turned into technique. When we accept the infinite task, without emphasising the importance of the life-world, we use the formalised outcome of the previous tasks and proceed. However, we are only proceeding at the level of abstraction only and the life-world as the ground of our understanding is lost. Leaving the life-world behind, we assume that this formalised account of the world is more accurate, and therefore more true. We then proceed to use it to understand the life-world. Yet the starting point of philosophy, from which sciences grew, is “nothing other than a life” dedicated to “a fully responsible thought”.³

Patočka explains and develops Husserl’s project. He claims that a “responsible attitude makes possible the *life in truth*”, in other words, life dedicated to account for every step of the task must be based on self-critical and, therefore responsible, rationality.⁴ Patočka agrees with Husserl that knowledge must start by being about the world of our living, but questions what Husserl means by this concept.

Ivan Chvatík, Lubica Učník and Inês Pereira Rodrigues take up the question of the life-world in Patočka’s work. Chvatík discusses Patočka’s asubjective phenomenology as serious and critical engagement with the work of Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Chvatík argues that Patočka’s asubjective phenomenology overcomes the persistent subjectivism of Husserl’s phenomenology by staying true to Husserl’s concept of the life-world (the “natural world” in Patočka’s words) as the horizon that makes possible all appearances, including ourselves. Chvatík also argues that Patočka emphasises the primary nature of appearing, as opposed to Being, and, thereby instates a conception of human knowledge that is aware of its limitations and is, hence, a responsible knowing. Along similar lines, Učník discusses the importance of history for Patočka’s understanding of the life-world. She argues that it is only through the encounter of a being who understands with a world in a historical situation that the meaningfulness of things can shine as well as grow dim. Učník emphasises the importance of understanding that scientific understandings—based upon formalisation—have informed our historical situation: the life-world cannot be recovered, but we are responsible for questioning and revealing the meaningfulness of the world for us. Rodrigues clarifies the difference between Husserl’s concept of life-world and Patočka’s notion of “originary totality”. She argues that the key difference is that Husserl starts from the world of given things, while Patočka understands the world as the possibility of all manifestation. For Patočka, the life-world is a historical world that makes possible manifestation.

Suzi Adams, Anthony Backhouse and Peter McDowell focus on Patočka discussion of the three movements of human existence. Adams focuses upon a similar theme to Učník, emphasising the importance of the movement of history as part of Patočka’s three movements of human existence. She particularly focuses upon the necessity to understand that Patočka’s three movements happen against the backdrop of interdependent and historical human affairs and the relevance of this insight for social theorists. Backhouse focuses on the movement of music as an analogy for Patočka’s three movements of human existence because music emphasises our dependence upon, participation with and responsibility for other people. McDowell outlines the importance of Patočka’s discussion of movement and responsibility for contemporary pedagogical theory. For Patočka, it is vital to understand the movement of human existence and to distinguish this living movement from the mathematical concept of movement as a formulaic description of a trajectory taken from A to B.

³ Patočka, Jan. "Edmund Husserl's Philosophy of the Crisis of the Sciences and his Conception of a Phenomenology of the 'Life-World'." Trans. Erazim Kohák. *Jan Patočka. Philosophy and Selected Writings*. Ed. Erazim Kohák. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1971], 226.

⁴ Ibid.

Drawing the distinction between the movement of existence and the mathematical conception of movement illustrates that natural science cannot speak to genuine human concerns.

To summarize the discussion of Patočka, the papers found in these conference proceedings highlight the importance of Patočka's thinking, not only as a translator of Husserl, but as a significant thinker in the phenomenological tradition. Patočka helps us to clarify Husserl's concept of life-world. Arguably, he also expands Husserl's notion of life-world to include a shared history that informs and shapes our experience of the world. As such, through Patočka's work, we can make sense of how we can understand the life-world as a ground of science as well as saturated with the products of natural scientific thinking. For Patočka, our responsibility lies in questioning the taken for granted assumptions that we make as part of living.

Husserl's concept of the life-world as distinct from the ideal world of natural science was also influential on thinkers such as Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. Ingo Farin discusses the relationship between death, life and responsibility through comparing Heidegger's discussion of death with Socrates' discussion of his own death in the *Apology*. For him, Heidegger's argument for death as an existential structure of life is not enough to ground a full discussion of ethics and human responsibility. Paul Healy argues that the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the work of Habermas are fruitful for understanding the limitations of formalism and aid in reawakening concern for the life-world and our responsibility for our knowledge. Lucy Tatman discusses the concept of time in Hannah Arendt's work and its relation to phenomenology. She argues that worldly time is an aspect of the life-world that is crucial to think about, so that calendar time, a succession of numbers, does not replace meaningful human story telling. For Tatman, our responsibility to confront the crisis of our times is to become the tellers of time. Through the different thinkers' discussions of formalism, the life-world and responsibility, we can see the continued relevance of the phenomenological tradition to understanding contemporary issues.

To finish where phenomenology started, James Burrowes and Anita Williams engage with Husserl's argument against psychologism and his distinction between the real and the ideal. Burrowes outlines Husserl's argument against logical psychologism with particular focus on arguing for the Husserlian distinction between the real and the ideal. Burrowes draws out the significance of Husserl's distinction between the real and the ideal—as well his argument against logical psychologism—for contemporary philosophy. He shows that strong naturalism continues to overlook the difference between the real and the ideal. Similarly, Williams discusses Husserl's argument against logical psychologism and his notion of categorical intuition in order to critique the idea that thoughts can be reduced to a material brain. Burrowes and Williams argue for Husserl's ongoing importance to debates within contemporary philosophy and psychology.

In our discussions of Husserl and Patočka as well as Heidegger, Arendt, Gadamer and Habermas, we hope to have made some headway in clarifying Husserl's concept of the life-world. In particular, we hope to highlight the importance of understanding the formal models of natural science as distinct from the world of our living. Our knowledge always starts from the life-world and, as such, we are responsible for the claims we make and must question our own and other's assumptions.

Conclusion

Patočka suggests that a major problem of modern times is the belief that it is possible to extend a successful scientific model into the midst of human affairs to predict human behaviour. This type of thinking is based on a mechanistic metaphysics using the "law-like calculus and working directly with a mechanical model of human relations".⁵ He further argues that because formal models are an

⁵ Patočka, "Edmund Husserl's Philosophy of the Crisis", 245.

abstraction from the life-world, they are devoid of responsibility. In short, it is not possible to rely on formal knowledge without, at the same time, requiring the technician to be responsible for the knowledge that computers produce.

As Husserl and Patočka acknowledge, science is successful and we cannot live without it: but the starting point from which science proceeds appears forgotten, leading to a crisis of culture. We have taken science as separate from the everyday world. We accept efficaciousness of reason in the domain of science but in the cultural world reason is questioned. Husserl shows that this is a misunderstanding of reason: reason is not only efficacious but also existential. We need to take into account the life-world for “merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people”.⁶ Patočka’s extension of this critique is to point out that formal models, based on mechanistic metaphysics and erroneously applied in the sphere of human affairs have consequences that are not accounted for.

Husserl stresses that responsibility should provide evidence of our thinking/knowledge and, as Patočka emphasizes, for our acting in the world. When we use computer models, we reduce human interactions to a mechanistic model and assume that perfect causality also applies to this domain. In this way, responsibility is replaced by mechanism. These models are used in every sphere of human affairs in a manner that elides the problematic nature of this type of thinking. However, Husserl and Patočka’s focus on responsibility as a key concept enables an account of the nature and limit of formalised thinking that has important implications for contemporary scientific and cultural practices.

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⁶ Husserl, Crisis, §2, 6.