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Jan Patočka via Jacques Derrida: Phenomenology, Deconstruction and the European *Eidos*

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Abstract

According to Jan Patočka, the phenomenon of the *universum* (whole) is first a matter of the thinkability and experience of existence. The history of Europe, for Patočka, denotes the movement towards 'the care of the soul'. Patočka's post-Husserlian parallelism with transcendental ideality of world-experience is disclosed as an appeal to 'truth', which has already been embodied within the soul of Europe, as the idea of Europe.

Patočka's world-experience was inaugurated both as the phenomenological experience of the world which has already been manifested and as a gnoseological epitome of the 'unknown'. Patočka's vision of the European *eidos* is strictly associated with the figure of the humanity 'to-come'. In other words, Patočka's 'heretical' cosmos of Europe provides a critical *potentia* of generating an alternate meaning of European humanity today.

Interpretation of the European *eidos*, the idea of Europe, has become a critical debate in contemporary political philosophy. This paper sets out to read Patočka's Platonic impulse for the European *eidos*, by going through Jacques Derrida's notions of deconstruction, trace and *différance*. The paper, accordingly, aims to interpret the critical relation between Derrida's concept of the appeal 'to-come' and Patočka's pursuit of the 'soul' for Europe.

Keywords: Patočka, Derrida, phenomenology, the care for soul, European *eidos*

Jan Patočka, a phenomenologist profoundly influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, has surprisingly been one of the least interpreted philosophers. Until his death on March 13, 1977 due to brain hemorrhage as a consequence of severe interrogations,¹ Patočka tried to unveil the possibility of effectuating a non-metaphysical mode and modality of wisdom, which is not merely molded with a mode of Socratic responsibility but also affiliated to the possibility of the political. The basis of this practical wisdom, for Patočka, should not merely be oriented in a philosophical continuum. Generating an alternate meaning of the political should also be interpreted as a critical responsibility of the philosopher.

Patočka's contribution to contemporary philosophy might be interpreted by reference to three major implications. First, Patočka provided an alternative reading of Husserlian phenomenology. Drawing upon Husserl's critique of the crisis of positivism² and Heidegger's critique of metaphysics of presence³, Patočka aimed at providing an interpenetrative understanding of immanence and transcendence. Epistemological corpus of this perspective implied the possibility of an authentic transcendentalism as being based on neither metaphysics nor presence. Patočka accordingly introduced a general critique of ontotechnicality, which is primarily based on epistemological grounds.

Second, Patočka's criticism against the ontotechnicality of modernity has been related to a contextual nexus. The political implication of this criticism might be defined by reference to the Neo-Platonic definition of the polis. By employing a general critique of ideology, Patočka provided a practical critique of modern subjectivism and its onto-historical foundations. Patočka, in this regard, referred to the centrality of particularity while enhancing the question of the political self. This point denotes the notion of authentic universality, which is interpreted by Patočka as an anti-foundationalist, and anti-metaphysical impulse of the political. Authentic universality is inaugurated not merely as a duty of the philosopher, but rather, as a responsibility of every Dasein. Patočka's notion of the political, in this regard, is derived from the particular designation of an authentic responsibility, or, *the care for soul*.

Third, Jan Patočka's reading of the Idea and form of Europe has provided a comprehensive ground for interpretation. By going through Husserlian phenomenology and its Heideggerian hermeneutic correction, Patočka provided an ontohistorical reading of Europe. At the very basis of his interpretation, Patočka placed the Platonic notion of eidos (Idea/form). Beside employing the epistemological nexus of the criticism of positivism and ontotechnicality, Patočka's reading of European eidos was also formed by the practical impulse of the political which is based on the centrality of responsibility as care (Sorge) for the soul. European eidos, in this regard, is interpreted by reference to an appeal to 'truth' embodied within the soul of Europe. Patočka's notion of the care for soul not only denotes a critical point of his interpretation of epistemology and of the political, but also inaugurates a highly controversial appeal for a 'soul' for Europe.

The Crisis of Ontotechnicality

The crisis of onto-technicality, as underpinned by both Edmund Husserl⁴ and Martin Heidegger,⁵ denoted the very basis of Patočka's optimistic phenomenology of humanism. Patočka's phenomenology denotes a counters-speculative argumentation which is primarily based on a systemic reconfiguration of the Platonic Idea. As regard to the critique of metaphysics of presence, Patočka denotes the centrality of the consequences of "negative Platonism" which denotes the locus of ontotechnic domination of the world through nature. By tracing the historical continuity of European eidos, Patočka reveals a double-bind of metaphysics. Patočka firstly implies a major criticism of metaphysical character of European thought. Yet, after, Patočka's account on metaphysics has become vulnerable by a counter argumentation of truth, which might as well be interpreted as a reflection of a counter metaphysical impulse. Accordingly, "the positing of an absolute and objective Idea was an event, he charges, that affected not only the development of Christianity but also the development of science and, in its wake, led to a scientific or objectivistic understanding of politics".⁶

Patočka's critique of the holism lying behind the objectivistic portrayal of the world is not only derived from the central emphasis posited on a systematic renewal of Platonic transcendentalism. By referring to the question of transcendentalism, mentions Patočka, "every objective and subjective givenness is subject to the criticism of the Idea".⁷ This point thus underpins the rejection of foundationalism, which is inaugurated as subjectivism. Patočka introduces an "asubjective phenomenology".⁸ Unlike the foundationalist appeal to objectified ideal essences, this perspective denotes a corresponding corpus of the responsibility of care as self-interpretation. According to Patočka, "the Idea enables us to see in a 'spiritual' sense in which we can say that we see something more than is contained in the given, in what is presented. It is what makes it possible for us to see more than we observe".⁹

Patočka's critique of subjectivism is mainly derived from Husserl's phenomenology. Husserlian phenomenology, according to Patočka, disclosed "the fundamental attempt at uncovering a new common level from which we can look over the totality of beings in a way different than that of the modern rationalistic objectivism".¹⁰ Husserlian concept of the "life-world", according to Patočka, "is not in any sense something like a given world, a world of the senses, as contrasted with a world we construct in thought. Though not constructed by active thought, it is still constituted by it".¹¹ According to Patočka, "modern mechanism was, of course, no mere scientific theory: its tenor was really metaphysical".¹² In other words, "the technical world is a world devoid of a metaphysics in the sense of a duplication of the world, in the sense of projecting the ground of the process of appearing upon the very limit that which appears".¹³

The Care for the Soul

The central tenant of Patočka's philosophy might be interpreted as the systematic renewal of Platonic Idea via Husserl and as the thorough reconsideration of Heideggerian care (*Sorge*) by the notion of *the care for soul*. The context of care, for Patočka, underpins the internal dispositif of practicality of philosophy. The care for the soul, in this sense, denotes not only the potentiality of truth but also the actuality of the problem of justice. In Findlay's words "although the injunction to 'care for the soul' comes directly from the Platonic dialogues, it is read negatively, that is, under the influence of the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics".¹⁴

Patočka's uses of the concept concern is derived from a combination of "the Platonic meaning of 'learning to die', *meletethanaton* from the *Phaedo*, and Heidegger's *Sorge*".¹⁵ By reference to the locus of Heideggerian emphasis on *care*, Patočka defines the general context of the "care for the soul" as an on-going task of understanding and unconcealment: "Care for the soul means that truth is something not given once and for all, nor merely a matter of observing and acknowledging the observed, but rather a lifelong inquiry, a self-controlling, self-unifying intellectual and vital practice".¹⁶ Patočka's reading of the Platonic Idea underpins a critical asset of interpenetrating care as universal responsibility. Rather than referring to transcendental reduction, Patočka's emphasis on the central importance of care is derived from the immanent meaning of the experience of the world, which is not merely corporeal but also abstract and historical. The principle of the care of the soul for Patočka denotes three major arguments affiliated to Plato:

1. As the general philosophical teaching that brings the soul into connection with the structure of being.
2. As the teaching about the life of the philosopher in the community and in history, that is, as the teaching about the state, in which the care of the soul is both possible and is the center of all state life and also the axis of historical occurrence.
3. As the teaching about the soul as the principle of individual life that is exposed to the fundamental experience and test of individual human existence, that is, death and the question of its meaning.¹⁷

According to Patočka, "the soul forms the center of the ontological-cosmological schema, there the soul is the center that mediates between being as the foundation of all existence, between principle being and the weakened being of things around us".¹⁸ The soul, herein, underpins an interpenetrative nexus gathering immanent and transcendent assets of world experience. In this sense, Patočka's interpretation of the soul connotes both the principle sign and signifier of being and nothingness. Patočka defines the soul as "the center mediating between principles and between principiates, between what is absolutely

eternal and what is close to nothingness in all its character and all its stamp of being”.¹⁹ In this regard, “*given certain circumstances, man could make at least the human world a world of truth and justice*. How this can be achieved is the very subject of the care of the soul”.²⁰

The soul is that which is capable of truth on the basis of a peculiar, untransferable, only-in-man-realized structure of the phenomenon as such. The soul is that to which things are revealed as they are, or that and what they are. Our own being has to show itself to us by that, that the call, which is encompassed within this situation, becomes for us also the impulse to that, so that our own essence, our own being, our own being in that which is its own, is revealed to us. We are also something that shows itself; we are also existence that can show itself, but our own being can reveal itself only as long as we understand that its core is the phenomenon as such, showing as such, truth as such—and if we take hold of this. On the basis that he stands between phenomenon and mere existence, man can either *capitulate and degenerate into mere existence*, or he can only then realize himself as a *being of truth, a being of phenomenon*. So this is the concept out which grew not only classical Greek philosophy but also Europe and our history. *The history of Europe* is in large part, up until, let us say, the fifteenth century, *the history of the attempt to realize the care of the soul*.²¹

The care of the soul according to Patočka, “is something that transforms us internally”.²² However, it also denotes the relational condition of the phenomenological movement of being towards truth. The conditional character of truth at this point could not be seen in terms of the metaphysics of presence. The responsibility of caring, rather, underscores a pre-metaphysical stance which does also imply the rejection of the dichotomization of the ratio and the body.

Saying in a Heideggerian sense, Patočka draws upon the radical reflection of Dasein, which denotes not only “the openness to the world”, but also to its own authenticity. The interplay between the “actual presence” of Dasein and the unconcealment of the world denotes the interpenetrative relation between actuality and potentiality. Patočka defines the locus of this interpenetration as “actual presence”, the critical element of “happening”.²³

The actual presence of happening, herein, resembles Jacques Derrida’s notion of ‘to-come’.²⁴ Instead of referring to a messianic appeal, or to an all-encompassing truth, this notion of the not-yet denotes the possibility of an internal truth as interpretation. The course of such interpretation, on the other hand, is also oriented in disposition. Patočka’s notion of care is hence oriented within “the structure of the being of Dasein” which reveals Heidegger’s *Sorge*.²⁵ By reference to the temporal character of Heideggerian disposition (*Befindlichkeit*), Patočka underpins that “self-understanding is linked to Dasein’s being always on the way (*unterwegs*) from somewhere to somewhere, that it is dwelling in between. Dasein is movement”.²⁶

The structure of Dasein is care. That includes existing in possibilities, understanding oneself as a self-realizing possibility, as a project actualizing itself...It is not the case that we would imagine our possibilities, but rather that we grasp and realize them. Our acting, our active living is in this sense always ahead of what we are realizing at the moment. This being ahead is itself something situated, something that comes from somewhere.²⁷

Patočka's interpretation of the care is also closely related to political practicality. Patočka's notion of the "care for the soul" denotes a Platonic definition of the political. The course of caring, in this sense, is also a political task. It conveys not merely a critical basis of the self, for Patočka, it is "possible obviously only in a well-ordered community".²⁸In Patočka's words, therefore, "because care of the soul is possible, the state is also possible, and the community is also possible...the question of the polis and its constitution, its constituting, is again the question of the soul, its character and its examination-care of the soul".²⁹By referring to the context of the "caring for the soul", Patočka underpinned the symbol of European *eidos* as an interpenetrative nexus combining 'European consciousness' and a European spirit. In other words, for Patočka, by reference to its Platonic origins, this interpenetrative formula might be defined as "the care for the soul" which is not merely represented as a "philosophical symbol" but rather "embedded in the European consciousness as its spiritual principle".³⁰

Patočka's Phenomenology of Europe

Interpreting the identity of Europe necessitates employing a comprehensive focus on the Idea and form of its invention.³¹Throughout the course of history, Europe has referred to several meanings. European *eidos* has often been underlined by the argument that '*homo europeus* could be characterized by a European spirit that had evolved over the ages from Roman, Greek and Christian heritages'.³²The very idea of this assumption might be defined by reference to the long discussed debate on the role of particularity while enhancing difference and identity.

Europe connotes a particular *topoi* and a historical community. Yet, at the same time, it inaugurates a universal context of normativity, which is based on the modality of a metonymical foundationalism veiling the question of the determining imperative of particular essences. Defining European *eidos* through universality has thus been critically related with modes and modalities of representation. Universality of the European *eidos*, in its representative nexus, is "linked to the value of exemplarity that inscribes the universal in the proper body of a singularity, of an idiom or a culture, whether this singularity be individual, social, national, state, federal, confederal, or not".³³

The very idea of this singularity, on the other hand, is directly effectuated by metaphysics of presence, not merely as a matter of identity, but rather by its canonical substitute through difference. Jacques Derrida has made this point available by mentioning that “*what is proper to a culture is to not be identical to itself...* Not to not have an identity, but not to be able to identify itself, to be able to say ‘me’ or ‘we’; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself or, if you prefer, only in the difference *with itself* [*avec soi*]. There is no culture or cultural identity without this difference *with itself*.”³⁴

Difference not merely reflects a critical potentiality for an alternate meaning of the European *eidos*. Rather, the locus of difference unveils the onto-historical pathologies of singularity.³⁵ Derridean reading of Patočka’s phenomenology underscores the centrality of distancing from metaphysics of presence. However, the “genealogy of responsibility and of freedom” does also refer to the responsibility of awakening from an “orgiastic or demonic sleep” which denotes the possibility of the philosophico-political emergence of a “new mythology”.³⁶

Derrida defines Patočka’s reading of care by reference to the context of “the secret of responsibility” which is always to be unconcealed. In this sense, “the secret of responsibility” does also denote “a nucleus of irresponsibility or of absolute unconsciousness”.³⁷ Patočka’s reading of European *eidos* is closely associated with the designation of Platonic politics at the very core of the idea of Europe and European Christianity.³⁸ Patočka’s notion of responsibility denotes an aporetic disposition exposed as the condition of possibility. In this sense, according to Derrida, “*aporia of responsibility* would thus define the relation between the Platonic and Christian paradigms throughout the history of morality and politics”.³⁹ Derrida mentions that Patočka’s correlation between these two sorts of responsibility underpins the potentiality of radical interpretation of the European *eidos*. According to Derrida,

What is implicit yet explosive in Patočka’s text can be extended in a radical way, for it is heretical with respect to a certain Christianity and a certain Heideggerianism but also with respect to all the important European discourses. Taken to its extreme, the text seems to suggest on the one hand that Europe will not be what it must be until it becomes fully Christian, until the *mysterium tremendum* is adequately thematized. On the other hand it also suggests that the Europe to come will no longer be Greek, Greco-Roman, or even Roman. The most radical insistence of the *mysterium tremendum* would be upon a Europe so new (or so old) that it would be freed from the Greek or Roman memory that is so commonly invoked in speaking of it; freed to the extent of breaking all ties with this memory, becoming heterogeneous to it. What would be the secret of a Europe emancipated from both Athens and Rome?...Patočka not only refers to the political profile of Neoplatonism; he also makes oblique reference to

something that is not a thing but that is probably the very site of the most decisive paradox, namely, the *gift that is not a present*, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unrepresentable, and as a consequence secret. The event of this gift would link the essence without essence of the gift to secrecy. For one might say that a gift that could be recognized as such in the light of day, a gift destined for recognition, would immediately annul itself.⁴⁰

According to Derrida, Patočka's philosophy of responsibility should be interpreted as a reflection of correlation between Platonic and Christian *mysteriumremendum*. For, Patočka did chose to domesticate the orgiastic element rather than destructing it, Patočka's argument on the care for soul reveals a new form of mythology, which might also be read through its mystical component. The origin of responsibility denotes a critical vein of Patočka's philosophy of care. Drawing upon the recognition that "there is 'a profound difference of principle' between Christianity and onto-theology"; Patočka tried to escape from this contradiction by trying to legitimize Heideggerian onto-theology. The very idea of this contradiction is inaugurated as "crypto-or mysto-genealogy of responsibility" which is also interweaved with "the double and inextricably intertwined thread of the gift and of death: in short of the *gift of death*".⁴¹ Regarding Derridean reading of Patočka's notion of responsibility as care for soul, central role of the "metaphysics of force" should also be mentioned. It is worth stressing here "everything Patočka tends to discredit—inauthenticity, technology, boredom, individualism, masks, roles—derives from a 'metaphysics of force'".⁴² According to Patočka

The great turning point in the life of western Europe appears to be the sixteenth century. From that time on another motif comes to the fore, opposing the motif of the care of the soul and coming to dominate one area after another, politics, economics, faith, and science, transforming them in a new style. Not a care for the soul, the care to be, but rather the care to have, care for external world and its conquest, becomes the dominant concern.⁴³

Drawing upon an emphasis on raised through the conditions and problems of "post-European humanity", Patočka introduced a phenomenological reading of the European *eidos*.⁴⁴ In Patočka's words, "the destiny of the truthful and the just, of those who opt for a life in truth, renders the idea of such a new human community indispensable".⁴⁵ By his phenomenological stance, Patočka intended to reformulate the historicity of Europe. Patočka's notion of Europe, in this regard, is directly derived from his emphasis on practical philosophy which as well is effectuated by the responsibility of care for soul.

Through the vein of responsibility, Patočka aimed at resystematizing the historical and philosophical dimension of European *eidos*. By the emphasis posited on the possibility of a “nonfoundational justification for moral and political activity”, Patočka revealed a possibility of “forging a coherent path between traditional Western foundationalism and the antifoundationalism of contemporary, postmodern work”.⁴⁶ Patočka’s interpretation of potentiality especially in the *Heretical Essays*, accordingly, underpinned a critical parallelism of possibility with Derrida’s appeal to-come, which has often been understood as a messianic argumentation of the not-yet.

As being related to “the axiom of deconstruction, that on the basis of which it has always set itself in motion and which links it, as with the future itself, to otherness, to the priceless dignity of otherness, that is to say, to justice”,⁴⁷ Patočka’s notion of a coming European community primarily oriented on the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. According to Patočka, “metaphysics, in its aspiration to a global understanding of the whole, ended up in the contradiction of integral humanism”.⁴⁸ Within the corpus of such metaphysics, according to Patočka, “both ‘being’ (already an abstraction) and, in particular, the verb to be, used in the sense of existing, since it refers to no specific object (being is not a real predicate) and because it serves only to subordinate individual objects to the widest class we can conceive, that of empirical objectivity as such, are fictions as well”.⁴⁹

Patočka’s notion of “becoming-responsible” referred to the “becoming-historical of humankind”.⁵⁰ Patočka’s phenomenology of Europe denotes not only the historicity but also the future of the European *eidos*. While introducing a systemic renewal of Platonic care through Husserl and Heidegger, Patočka’s notion of responsibility also intersected with themes from Christianity. However, originality of Patočka’s reading of the European *eidos* is its irreducibility to any proper mode and modality of presence. Drawing upon the phenomenological critique of metaphysics of presence, Patočka inaugurated a “genealogy of European responsibility or of responsibility as Europe, of *Europe-responsibility* through the decoding of a certain history of mysteries, of their incorporation and their repression” not only in terms of interpretation or through reconstitution but also via deconstruction.⁵¹

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