

*A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled "Issues Confronting the Post-European World" and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.*

## Essay 27

# How to Use Other People's Concepts

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### Abstract

In the present essay the author emphasizes on the conceptual usages of philosophers in order to make clear some difficulties concerning the Cartesian beginning of phenomenology and concerning the creation of philosophical systems. This is done by analysing some less-known texts of the famous Czech phenomenologist, Jan Patočka.

*There is more than one good reason why this story should be a conceptual history.*

Th. Kisiel, *On the Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*

I do not even have to say that terms and concepts in philosophical discourse used nowadays, the semantic background of which has been crystallised throughout the centuries, are regarded in a different ways by philosophers and historians of philosophy concerning at least their sometimes slight differences and multiple meanings. It is obvious that we should deal only with the way of the historians and, in close connection with this, the topic of our present study will be the conceptual usage of the philosophers, more precisely, from a very special point of view.

As we have already hinted in the motto of our lecture, Theodore Kisiel's basic work, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, may be an enriching force in this respect, and this influence might be set forth by the following words, which can be generalised in some way, with no proof needed: "From the very beginning, Heidegger's entire way is marked by this traffic of concepts."<sup>1</sup> We can do this in relation to the need for legitimacy, even though not too many philosophers who applied and even created concepts in the strict way we got used to in the works of Heidegger will be mentioned. Nevertheless, one can find some places in Plato where the previous agreement on the meaning of notions becomes the necessary precondition of reasonable philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Kisiel, Theodore: *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*. 3. p.

talks or dialogues. Thus, the birth and disappearance of philosophical concepts, sometimes their appearance in another, renewed way, or their oscillation back and forth between hiding and presence, the reformation of terms characterizing eternal problems, and more precisely their understanding, can be said to be a suitable but not yet sufficient method of writing the history of philosophy. We do not want to suggest that the history of philosophy can be reduced to purely conceptual history, or this latter might become a method that fulfils all the needs of understanding philosophy, but some considerable goals could be achieved by its use. As Kisiel says referring to Heidegger “It would establish why and how the various conceptual *Gestalts* take shape and are sometimes undone and replaced or reshaped, eventually finding their place within the fabric of *Being and Time*.”<sup>2</sup> In the present lecture we should put the emphasis on the “how” through analysing some particular examples of importance.

Although we do not want to make a systematic description of the difficulties the conceptual history must face, one should mention them in this context. First, let us call to mind Joseph Fell's remarkable work on the connections and differences between Heidegger's and Sartre's texts, which one should consider as a fundamental study in the field of the analytic reception of phenomenology. He pointed out that “It is entirely possible for two thinkers to use the same terms but to mean quite different things.”<sup>3</sup> However conceptual history presumes a well-defined continuity, which can hardly flow from or be based on the temporal succession of words and terms of everyday usage. If this total conceptual distinctness occurs even to philosophers, living in the same epoch, having quite similar philosophical beginnings, working on nearly the same topics, sometimes referring to one another, one can hardly talk about continuity concerning the comparison between philosophical works written in the classical era and in the modern times. So one should keep in mind this possible but not too likely objection, but we prefer now to continue the development of our plan in order to offer hold of some results concerning the historical context of the usage of concepts.

Fell continues as follows: “everything hangs on grasping the context or ambience within which a term occurs or an assertion is made.” In the next section we would like to make clear through some specific examples how the philosophical concepts take shape and become more or less defined in a historical way, how some recent philosophers use them. As we will see, the analyzed concepts as we will see, can be divided into two major groups. First of all there are the names of some philosophical ways of thinking; in this context our principal example will be Cartesianism. The others are true philosophical concepts and terms and the study of their changes through centuries holds the promise of much more significant results.

It commonly happens in readings in philosophy to start out as follows: “Even in Aristotle one may see...” Nevertheless, we should come to the statement that the permanent and perpetual movement of concepts according to which the notions begin changing forms, context, and even authors, comes to the world through the first really historical work, namely through the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. He writes about the meaning of being, and concludes that early Greek philosophers used this term without being aware of its dual character, namely of potentiality and actuality. From that

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<sup>2</sup> Kisiel, Theodore: *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*. 3. p.

<sup>3</sup> Fell, Joseph P.: *Heidegger and Sartre*. xii. p.

moment, the term being gets the context in which we are deeply habituated nowadays and, in the meantime, it divides the space of ontology into two parts.

So far, one can find an example of self-characterising at Aristotle. In one of his famous passages, he wrote that he was a Platonist. This statement stands in the crossfire of different explications made by commentators of Aristotle, but it can be easily shown that from the point of view of the later readers of his works, the statement mentioned before can hardly be true, especially if one considers the history of the influence of the thoughts of Aristotle. By the way, for Aristotle the term, "Platonist", could not have the meaning of adaptation of Plato's ideas. One may hint that we should deal here with Plato's unwritten thoughts, nevertheless we can reach the result that not only the pure philosophical concepts but also the characterizing terms change in some way or another.

On the contrary, we should mention the example of Descartes' case with scholasticism. He himself had refused to think in a Scholastic way and one of his major aims was to exceed its limits. But as we all know, Descartes' method of argumentation and his logical terms are familiar and sometimes the same as the Scholastic ones. It is sufficient now to refer to Etienne Gilson's marvellous and peerless study on this topic, namely the famous *Le role de la Pensée Médiéval dans la Formation du Système Cartésienne*. But on the other hand, we can hardly say that Descartes thought in a Scholastic or neo-Scholastic way, even though the formation of his reasoning and the set of terms used has its scholastic roots, because Descartes applied them in totally different ways and for other purposes.

One should not forget the fact described by some of his commentators (e.g. L. J. Beck) that the *Meditations* of Descartes has its origin in a Jesuit book. But even in this case one should not come to any other conclusion than that the copy of some formal methods or outer structures cannot have influence on the measure of difference between these two kinds of work, whether the years Descartes spent in La Flèche had its indisputable importance. Yet, we can also read in a different way the notes made by Husserl, or even reappraise them: "*ces méditations dessinent le prototype du genre de méditations nécessaires à tout philosophie qui commence son œuvre (...) qui seules peuvent donner naissance à une philosophie.*"<sup>4</sup> The *Meditations* of Descartes do not outline the idea, only the prototype of the meditations preferred by Husserl, but thanks to its Jesuite origins it has the character of a kind of spiritual exercise, so it could also become an easy and effective theme for every beginner in philosophy, as Husserl mentioned in the *Krisis*.

To spend more time thinking about Descartes and of Cartesianism, let us turn our attention to a more striking problem that had been raised by a correspondent of Descartes. The person, not yet identified by commentators, warns Descartes that his famous argument had also been used by Saint Augustine. This well-known fact did not make Descartes be upset, first, because he points out that this is "so simple and natural that it might have occurred to any writer."<sup>5</sup> Secondly, because this is not a kind of syllogism, but the first and unshakeable evidence of the Cartesian epistemology, the only truth that does not depend on the "*veracité divine*." So the *cogito* has a totally different meaning, context, and background at Descartes.

<sup>4</sup> Husserl, Edmund: *Méditations Cartésiennes*. 22. p. Paris: Vrin, 1996

<sup>5</sup> AT-III-248. AT: Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Paris: Vrin/CNRS

The term “Cartesian,” which signifies both the philosophical thoughts of René Descartes and the way of searching for truth, placing, and posing problems, can be used while characterising a way or method of philosophical process. If we consider ourselves a Cartesian, a follower of Descartes, we may feel that we possess an easy-to-use term, but on the contrary, in this case we will have to face very important questions full of difficulties. For example, it is easy to call Husserl a Cartesian or neo-Cartesian philosopher, even though, he pointed out in his *Meditations* that “*C’est par l’étude de ses Méditations que la phénoménologie naissante.*”<sup>6</sup> So it seems obvious that phenomenology has a Cartesian origin, or one may say in a certain restricted way, that phenomenology is a kind of Cartesianism.

Husserl emphasized that the most significant feature of Cartesian philosophy is that it tries to base the sciences “*sur un fondement d’un caractère absolu.*” This latter passage is not a kind of heritage of Cartesian philosophy, but that of the works of Descartes, so we have to understand it in the first mentioned way. Thus, if Husserl adopted Descartes’ point of view on the grounding of a pure science, we should call him a Cartesian, but only in this sense of the term.

Nevertheless, André Glucksmann’s bon mot, “*Descartes, c’est la France,*” cannot be generalised as follows: “*Descartes, c’est la phénoménologie.*” And this statement is less true for Jan Patočka in whose writing, *Komenský and the opened Soul*, we can read the following concerning modern philosophy: “*Es ist typisch für das 17. Jahrhundert, und es hängt wohl ebenso mit der geistigen wie mit der geschichtlichen Lage der damaligen europäischen Menschheit zusammen, dass sich in jenen Tagen Bestrebungen zu Wort melden, die das bedrängte genus humanum durch eine einheitliche, druchgreifende Reform seines geistigen Lichtes, seiner Vernunft, auf einer radikal neuen Weg zu bringen suchen.*”<sup>7</sup> Anyhow we have to note that those feelings, attributed to the 17th Century man by him, more or less match his master, Husserl, too.

Patočka continues: “*So hofft Descartes, zum ersten mal in der Geschichte ein echtes Kriterium für Prinzipengewissheit gewonnen zu haben.*”<sup>8</sup> This describes not only Descartes but also other philosophers. Moreover, maybe even less for Descartes than for Husserl, because Descartes himself, even though he had found the desired science, probably did not claim glory for himself. It seems that this description matches more the image of Descartes than Descartes himself. Thus, Patočka can be considered—due to his master—as belonging more to this conception falsely attributed to Descartes, because Husserl made efforts to grounding a kind of “*science admirable*”, even though he called it rigorous science. “*Nos méditations (...) ont, dans l’essentiel, atteint leur but (...) montrer la possibilité concrète de l’idée cartésienne d’une science universelle à partir d’un fondement absolu.*”<sup>9</sup>

All these difficulties would seem very simple if we take a look at the awkward mix-up of phenomenological concepts by Sartre, Heidegger, and Patočka. As Patočka mentioned “Nothingness plays a totally different role in Sartre or in Heidegger” and

<sup>6</sup> Husserl, Edmund: *Méditations Cartésiennes*. 17. p.

<sup>7</sup> Patočka, Jan: *Komenský a otevřená duše*. SS-KS-II. 346. p. SS: Sebrané Spisy Jana Patočky, Praha: OIKOYMENH/ Archiv Jana Patočky (The quotation is taken from its German original, published in the Archivní Soubor)

<sup>8</sup> Patočka, Jan: *Komenský a otevřená duše*. SS-KS-II. 346. p.

<sup>9</sup> Husserl, Edmund: *Méditations Cartésiennes*. 244. p.

comes to the following sort of moral question “What can man do in this world?”<sup>10</sup> despite the fact that none of these ontologists reached the point where moral questions might be posed: “*L’ontologie ne saurait formuler elle-même des prescriptions morales.*”<sup>11</sup> as Sartre said in his famous quotation. Nevertheless, as Merleau-Ponty asserted, “*la réforme spirituelle réformera l’Etat sans qu’on ait eu à y penser,*”<sup>12</sup> so moral considerations inevitably occur, whether in an explicit way or not.

Let us focus for a while on Patočka’s independence from Husserl. This short note can be based on Ricœur’s lecture emphasizing the two foci of Patočka’s œuvre, namely his dissertation work at the Charles University written in German and the most famous of his *Heretical Essays*. He points out that even in his early writing the conceptual departure from Husserl to his own system had begun.

To understand the importance of the influence of Platonic and Comenian thinking on Patočka, it seems worth analysing some of his texts on history of philosophy. He begins Comenius and the open soul with the following: “*Die menschliche Seele wurde von alten und modernen Philosophen oft in das Zentrum der philosophischen Fragestellungen gerückt. In der Neuzeit kann man die Grundentscheidung der Seelenlehre, um welche die Philosophie sich müht, auf den Gegensatz der offenen und geschlossenen Seele bringen.*”<sup>13</sup> This has a great importance even for him, so it is not the usual “first sentence” of the text, because it makes Patočka’s standpoint clear. In this passage he entirely commits himself to the Comenian concept of the open soul and against the Cartesian concept of the closed soul that determined the progress of the European natural sciences as a whole, and he stresses its connection with the fall or catastrophe of Europe, presenting it as a responsible for the loss and the end of Europe. “*Wenn das Europa mit der geschlossenen Seele schon an viel geringeren Gegensätzen, welche sich als letztlich unlösbar erwiesen, zusammenbrach, so warten im nacheuropäischen Zeitalter viel shoffere auf, die verhangnisvoll werden können angesichts der gesteigerten, die Lebenssubstanz selbst gerichteten Vernichtungstechnik, welche vielleicht zur Quintessenz der geschlossenen Seele gehört.*”<sup>14</sup>

We can draw nearly the same conclusions from the fact that, in a footnote to *On the Concept of Psyche in Plato*<sup>15</sup>, Patočka made clear that he wanted to make another contrast with the world of Descartes. And it is clear from other texts that he is on the side of the Platonic movement, and not on that of Descartes, or more exactly he is against the fixed character of Descartes’ image.

After we have seen that Plato and Comenius had played the most important role in forming Patočka’s way of thinking—naturally alongside Husserl’s influence—let us turn our attention towards a very special concept of our author, taken from Plato. *Epimeleia tes psukhes. Péče o duši. Starosti o duši. Sorge für die Seele. The care of the soul.* It is not by chance have we mentioned the concept in Greek first; Plato

<sup>10</sup> Patočka, Jan: *Věcnost a dějinnost*. SS-PD-I- 213. p.

<sup>11</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul: *L’être et le néant*. 673. p. Paris: Gallimard, 1998

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Potny, Maurice: *Eloge de la Philosophie*. 15. p. Paris: Gallimard, 1980

<sup>13</sup> Patočka, Jan: *Komenský a otevřená duše*. SS-KS-II. 337. p.

<sup>14</sup> Patočka, Jan: *Komenský a otevřená duše*. SS-KS-II. 349. p.

<sup>15</sup> Patočka, Jan: *O duši u Platóna*. SS-PD-II.

uses it rather often as well. In one of his pure classical philological texts, Patočka places the concept at the center of Plato's system.<sup>16</sup>

But the fact that we have also mentioned it in German is not because we wanted to suggest that this concept is derived also from Heidegger's *Sorge*. Its contrary is more true: Heidegger's *Sorge* is not of Platonic origin, but of a biblical and Augustinian origin, if we refer to *Bekümmierung* and *cura*, so it can not bring us closer to the understanding of Patočka's term.

Why can one say that the central concept is the care of the soul? The answer can be based on research in two different contexts. One of them can be considered as a kind of history of philosophy, and the topic of the other is history itself. The first one is *Plato and Europe*, written in 1973, and the second is the unfinished manuscript, *Europe and the Post-European World*. Not surprisingly, the care of the soul appears in *Plato and Europe* when the polis and the Platonic *Republic*, to be more precise, are analyzed, i.e., Patočka deals with the problem of basic meaning of the psyche in close connection with *arête*, then he enumerates the three parts of the soul in Platonic acceptance, in order to give an entirely different connotation.

Parenthetically, we should insert a brief comment on how Patočka deals with concepts and philosophical thoughts. There are three levels, the first is a pure philological way, e.g., like in the text, *On the Concept of Psyche in Plato*, the second is that of the history of philosophy, as one can see in *Plato and Europe*, and the third and most interesting one is the primary philosophical way, as we can see in *Europe and the Post-European World*, where the history of philosophy is just a kind of instrument.

One could think that the role of the guardians should be taken in its original sense. Not being satisfied with the defensive functions of pure physical strength or force, Patočka goes further. The guardians defend the polis, and if we take the polis only as a geographical unit the borders of which can be paved with smaller or larger stones, within which people drink wine, exercise, and Greek-speaking males undertake grammatical and commercial activities, we can misunderstand the situation. Patočka does not commit this error. He means by *polis* neither a geographical, nor physical or material being, but an idea. Parenthetically, we can also mention that the false problem concerning the political activity of Patočka can be eliminated here. This might cause a problem only if we use the word "*political*" in its current sense, we forget its original spiritual meaning described by Patočka. The role of the guardians is to defend the polis, not with their physical strength but with their force of soul.

The levels cannot be mingled, even if they interfere. Socrates guarded the soul of his city in the name of well cared for soul and of course was empowered by the oracle of Delphi, putting up himself in great dangers at the same time. In his writings on the *Charta 77*, Patočka mentioned the same danger several times. In one passage he says that these ideals are worth living and dying for. In his text on history the starting point is not the Platonic republic or the three parts of the soul, but Europe itself. This is the Europe that has ended, but we should still know what collapsed and from what we inherit.

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<sup>16</sup> Patočka, Jan: *O duši u Platóna*. SS-PD-II. 59. p.

We conclude that Patočka's concept of the care of the soul was came from Plato, influenced by Komenský, and later became a kind of footnote to Plato, in the sense of Whitehead. The concept underwent a process of differentiation and found its new place in the system of Patočka, but we can say that it keeps something from the original essence of Plato's thinking as well as that of Europe.

Of all the cases we have, that of the care of the soul seems to be the best one to make clear the conceptual background or system, the importance and sense of a concept, even in the case of authors separated by centuries. It can be seen that the sequence of our examples may lead to almost similar methods of conceptual adaptations. Any new approach of a concept or notion does not have to mean it's misunderstanding, but can lead to a new understanding.