

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 43

Jan Patočka: Critical Consciousness and Non-Eurocentric Philosopher of the Phenomenological Movement¹

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Abstract

By his critical reflections on the crisis of modern civilization, Jan Patočka, phenomenologist of the Other Europe, incarnates the critical consciousness of the phenomenological movement. He was in fact one of the first European philosophers to have emphasized the necessity of abandoning the hitherto Eurocentric propositions of solution to the crisis when he explicitly raised the problems of a “Post-European humanity”. In advocating an understanding of the history of European humanity different from those of Husserl and Heidegger, Patočka directs his philosophical reflections back to sketch a more profound phenomenology of the natural world insufficiently thematized in Husserl and absent in Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. By virtue of its emphasis on the structural characteristics of movement, of praxis, and of the disclosure of the abyssal nature of human existence and of the original nothingness as the (non-)foundation of the phenomenal world, Patočka’s phenomenology of the natural world constitutes an opening towards the reception of Others and other cultures, in particular that of Chinese Taoist philosophy.

¹ The early version of the present paper was read at “Issues Confronting the Post-European World: A Conference dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977) on the occasion of the founding of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations”, organized by the Center for Phenomenological Research Prague at Charles University and the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague, November 6-10, 2002.

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Introduction

Patočka as Non-Eurocentric Phenomenological Philosopher

The pages below constitute a preliminary and humble attempt to answer the following question: How to make sense of the vast number of Patočka's writings, themselves dispersed in most cases in the apparently modest form of exegetic exercises on works of classical thinkers, ancient (e.g., Plato, Aristotle) or contemporary (Husserl, Heidegger)? The reply we risk to propose is: Patočka's reflections represent perhaps one of the most fruitful philosophical endeavors within the wider phenomenological movement to confront the crisis of modern civilization which Patočka calls "Over-civilization and its internal conflict".²

Recapturing and renewing in a new direction Husserl's diagnosis of the crisis of European civilization, Patočka was one of the first European philosophers—a philosopher of the Other Europe—to have emphasized with lucidity the necessity of abandoning the hitherto Eurocentric propositions of solution to the crisis—for example Comte's positivism and its variants, Marxism and bourgeois liberalism—when he explicitly raised the problems of a "Post-European humanity".³ In advocating an understanding of the history of European humanity which is different from that of Husserl as well as Heidegger, Patočka is able to direct his philosophical reflections on history back to the formulation of a more profound phenomenology of the natural world insufficiently thematized in Husserl and absent in Heidegger (at least the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*).

Such a phenomenology of the natural world includes the themes of the Earth as well as those of movement and human existence as movement. These themes form the basic elements and the ground of the apparition of all inner-worldly beings. Patočka's reflections also bring into light the primacy of the practical over the theoretical within the natural world. Thus the sketch of the structure of phenomenality starting from the phenomenology of the natural world can pave the way for a phenomenology of the cultural world with a more credible universal validity claim in comparison to the Husserlian and the Heideggerian attempts.

² Jan Patočka, "La surcivilization et son conflit", in *Liberté et sacrifice. Ecrits politiques*, trans. into French from Czech and German by Erika Abrams (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1990), pp. 99-177.

³ J. Patočka, "Réflexion sur l'Europe", *ibid.*, p. 181.

The Husserlian attempt, which identifies Greek *theoria* with European Science as the authentic cultural world of universal significance,⁴ is without doubt formed with an explicit Eurocentric bias. As for Heidegger, his National-Socialist engagement as well as his defense of Europe by way of a hostile positioning against America and Russia,⁵ make him never entirely unscathed by the suspicion of Eurocentric overtones. By contrast, Patočka's phenomenology of the natural world, by virtue of its emphasis on the structural characteristics of movement, of *dynamis*, of praxis, and of the disclosure of the abyssal, unfathomable nature of human existence and of the original nothingness as the (non-)foundation of the phenomenal world, constitutes an opening towards the reception of Others and other cultures, in particular that of Chinese Taoist philosophy.

I. Patočka's Significance for the Chinese Philosophical Community Today

- a. Patočka's heroic resistance against political persecution under a socialist regime in his home country, by incessantly pursuing independent philosophical research and private philosophical teaching practically under the eyes of state police,⁶ is an eminent example showing that it is possible to continue to philosophize under adverse social, political, and institutional conditions (he was allowed to teach philosophy only during eight years in his whole intellectual life, from 1945-1949, and then from 1968-1972, and had been under almost total isolation during the 1950s). The way he exercises the freedom of thinking and conducts his moral conscience at the risk of his own existence is an act of affirmation of the basic civil rights prescribed verbally

⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, *Husserliana VI*, ed. W. Biemel (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1954), pp. 327-330; *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Eng. Trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 281-283.

⁵ "And yet a *question, the question*: "Is 'Being' a mere word and its meaning a vapor, or is it the spiritual fate of the West?" This Europe, in its unholy blindness always on the point of cutting its own throat, lies today in the great pincers between Russia on the one side and America on the other. Russia and America, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man." Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953), pp. 28-29; *Introduction to Metaphysics*, New Eng. Trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 40.

⁶ Cf. Henri Declève, "Philosophie et liberté selon Patočka", in *Profils de Jan Patočka*, ed. Henri Declève (Bruxelles: Publications des Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1992), p. 114.

- by the law of the socialist state but proscribed in fact under a totalitarian regime. This act comprises not only an educational content directed towards the younger generations of his own country, but also a political message of protestation against institutional violations of these rights under such a regime. Seen from this perspective, Patočka's effort of maintaining independence with regard to the existing political regime and social situation constitutes an unequalled model for contemporary Chinese intellectuals in their search for and affirmation of independent intellectual personality.
- b. Many of Patočka's writings take the apparently humble form of textual exegesis of classical philosophers (ancient, modern or contemporary). This characteristic is comparable at first glance to the classical Chinese scholastic tradition. In the Chinese philosophical tradition, the exegesis of classical texts is a prevailing exercise of thinking. Yet in most cases, with some rare exceptions (e.g., Wang Pi in relation to Lao-Tzu and Guo Xiang in relation to Zhuang-Tzu), traditional Chinese exegesis of classical texts adopts an excessively reverential care with regard to the ancients in such a way that philosophical interrogation rarely comes to the surface.

In traditional China, the work of thinking often identifies itself with pure exegesis of classical texts to such a degree that, for example during the great period of classical studies of the 18th and 19th Centuries, some allegedly good scholarly work may simply amount to an accumulation and juxtaposition of a quantity of previous scholars' commentaries of the same text. In the case of Lao-Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, the number of previous scholars' commentaries put side by side can easily be twenty or thirty.

By contrast, Patočka's exegesis of classical thinkers, e.g., the emphasis on Socrates' care of the soul,⁷ the reinterpretation of Plato's famous concept of *chorismos* not as separation between the universal and the particular within the domain of knowledge but as ontological difference, i.e., as experience of distance with regard to the reality and hence the exercise of freedom,⁸ or the re-centering of Aristotle away from the scholastic system of hierarchy of beings and values towards a phenomenology of the natural

⁷ J. Patočka, *Platon et l'Europe*, Trans. into French from Czech by Erika Abrams (Paris: Editions Verdier, 1983).

⁸ J. Patočka, "Le platonisme négatif", in *Liberté et sacrifice*, *op. cit.*, p. 86 sq. Patočka's reinterpretation of Platonic Ideas is comparable to that of the contemporary Chinese philosopher LAO Sze-Kwang, author of a 4-volume History of Chinese Philosophy. For the latter, Platonic Ideas as universals, in opposition to particulars, can be interpreted, from the point of view of philosophy of culture, as ideals and values in opposition to reality. Cf. LAO Sze-Kwang, 《文化哲學講演錄》 ("Lectures on Philosophy of Culture"), edited and annotated by Kwok-ying LAU (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002), p. 6.

world built around the concept of movement, dynamis, and praxis,⁹ is in fact a kind of interrogative dialogue that calls upon the whole European cultural tradition as interlocutor. The result is that the classical thinkers in question (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) speak to us with a freshness and reflective depth seldom seen in the past such that this thinking tradition comes to life again in spite of the unfavorable intellectual climate of the contemporary world.

For the Chinese philosophical community, where there is a constant concern for the possibility of giving fresh life again to classical Chinese texts, Patočka's art of exegesis constitutes a formidable challenge as well as a model of appropriation. Today, we are confronted by the task of finding the way to reread classical Chinese authors such that the latter are not merely objects of reverence but thinkers capable of regenerating the subsequent development of Chinese cultural tradition. This task amounts to finding the way to let classical Chinese authors speak to the contemporary world. In front of such a task, Patočka's work constitutes surely one of the best inspiration.

II. Patočka as the Critical Consciousness of the Phenomenological Movement

Why does Patočka's work posthumously carry such an exceptional pedagogical and critical potential in spite of the limited scope of audience his work could be addressed to during his lifetime? The answer is that he is animated by the idea of human existence as human freedom.¹⁰ According to him, the transition from the epoch of prehistory to history is characterized by the situation of shock: humanity is under the assault of problematycity, human being is haunted by the search for meaning.¹¹

⁹ J. Patočka, "Notes sure la préhistoire de la science du mouvement: le monde, la terre, le ciel et le mouvement de la vie humaine", "Le monde naturel et la phénoménologie", "Méditation sur *Le Monde naturel comme problème philosophique*", "La conception aristotélicienne du mouvement: signification philosophique et recherches historiques", in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l'existence humaine*, French Trans. Erika Abrams (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 3-12, 13-49, 50-124, 127-138.

¹⁰ J. Patočka, "L'idéologie et la vie dans l'idée", in *Liberté et sacrifice*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹¹ J. Patočka, *Essais hérétiques sur la philosophie de l'histoire*, Trans. into French by Erika Abrams with a Preface by Paul Ricoeur (Paris: Editions Verdier, 1981), pp. 85-86; *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Eng. Trans. by Erazim Kohák (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1996), pp. 74-75.

We can speak of history where life becomes free and whole, where it consciously builds room for an equally free life, not exhausted by mere acceptance, where after the shaking of life's "small" meaning bestowed by acceptance, humans dare undertake new attempts at bestowing meaning on themselves in the light of the way the being of the world into which they have been set manifests itself to them.¹²

Freedom, in its primordial sense, is neither arbitrary action nor disinterest. Freedom is rather a function of truth. Yet truth according to Patočka is not a question of the merely theoretical order. Rather, truth is in turn the correlate of freedom: "Truth is the internal struggle of a human being for her/his essential freedom, for the internal freedom which the human as human possesses in her/his depth, independently of what she/he is at the level of facts. Truth is the question of the authenticity of human."¹³ Understood in this way, human existence, in conformity to its essence, prescribes to itself the responsibility to search for truth; thus freedom is the responsibility for truth. That is why truth understood in its primordial sense is not theoretical contemplation, but an ethical relation to human freedom of the practical order: "Truth can only be grasped in action, and only a being who acts effectively (which does not simply 'reflect' an objective process) can enter into relation with truth."¹⁴

Truth is not passive contemplation but active search for sense and its first step consists of critical reflection on the situation where a human engages herself/himself. "We cannot attain truth on our situation except by following the course of critique, by way of critical reflection."¹⁵ Thus a human's responsibility for truth requires her/him to reflect on her/his situation in a critical manner such that she/he will be able "to modify, to transform her/his situation into a conscious and elucidated situation, which as such will be leading a way towards the truth of the situation."¹⁶ In short, freedom for Patočka is the care for truth animated by the critical spirit with regard to the situation in which a human finds herself/himself with a view to transforming it.

In this connection, it will not be surprising to find that Patočka incarnates the critical consciousness within the entire phenomenological movement. Here the term "critique" can be understood in a threefold manner with respect to three

¹² Ibid., p. 54/ 40-41.

¹³ J. Patočka, "La surcivilization et son conflit", in *Liberté et sacrifice, op. cit.*, p. 160.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁵ J. Patočka, *Platon et l'Europe*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Ibid.

lines of critical thought: in the Kantian sense, in the sense of the Frankfurt School, and in the sense of Foucault's history of the present.

a. Critique in the Kantian Sense

One of the well-known results of Kantian critical philosophy is the establishment of the irreducible distinction between the realm of reason and the realm of freedom. Whereas reason reigns in the this-worldly and objective realm of knowledge, freedom, being the subjective aspiration towards transcendence, is the master in the realm of noumenon. Patočka accepts this part of the Kantian critical heritage. Yet, going against the Neo-Kantian tendency of over-emphasizing the dominance of the theoretical scientific attitude, he reinterprets the duality of reason and freedom with the emphasis on freedom and on the primacy of the practical. His emphasis on the care of the soul in Socrates, his reinterpretation of Plato's *chorismos* as experience of freedom, and his re-centering of Aristotle's philosophy towards a philosophy of movement and praxis are gestures showing his attitude towards the primacy of the practical.

b. Critique in the Sense of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School

This is a line of critical thought developed from the Marxist critique of political economy. The general feature of the Critical Theory of Frankfurt School is the critique of domination. Its earlier object of criticism is political domination: the critique of authoritarianism and totalitarianism carried out by Herbert Marcuse¹⁷ and Max Horkheimer.¹⁸ During the Second World War, this line of critical thought is radicalized into the critique of domination of instrumental reason in the European modernity. Horkheimer and Adorno are the forerunners of this critical radicalism.¹⁹

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State", first published 1937, republished in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 3-42; "The Affirmative Character of Culture", first published 1937, republished in *Negations*, in *ibid.*, pp. 88-133; H. Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

¹⁸ Max Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family", first published 1936, Eng. Trans. in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 47-128. Cf. David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), Chapter 2, pp. 40-76.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Horkheimer & T. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (New York: Social Studies Association, Inc., 1944; reissued in Germany by S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1969); *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Eng. Trans. J. Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, Inc., 1972); M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947); M.

As mentioned above, Patočka had continued lecturing on philosophy in a private manner under the eyes of the police. This act of defiance against the police state is itself an implicit critique of political domination under the totalitarian form of government. In the writings of Patočka, the critique of political domination is never as vehement as the Frankfurt School in tone; but the substance of their critique remains close to those of the Frankfurt School.

Yet in Patočka's long article on "Over-civilization and its Internal Conflict", the critique of political domination in the totalitarian state is placed under the critique of the extreme version of modern civilization, which Patočka calls "radical over-civilization" or collectivism. According to him, both forms of over-civilization (the moderate version—bourgeois liberalism—and the radical version—socialism) are animated by a common pair of ideals concerning truth and human freedom. Both versions think that the absolute domination of objective being constitutes the most efficient control over the external world, hence serves best the cause of human freedom. While the moderate version of over-civilization, which practices individualist economic competition as the ultimate means to attain human freedom and to bring material pleasure, results in the negligence of social justice, its radical-socialist counter-part adopts violent collectivist means in the intention to abolish social injustice. But the result of the latter is disastrous: not only is material pleasure deprived, but spiritual well-being too. Being the object of mechanically planned oppression, individual freedom exists only nominally. The lack of personal initiative results in collective indifference in face of social injustice. Under the unity of a totally planned state, autonomous personality is impossible, and the whole collectivity becomes a gigantic non-organic body.²⁰

In fact, for Patočka, the radical version of over-civilization reveals the internal conflict of modern civilization. It is this internal conflict which inevitably brings modern civilization to its decline, and his analysis here coincides with Frankfurt School's diagnosis of the domination of instrumental rationality in the modern world and its critique. Yet Patočka proposes a subtler schema of analysis. For him the reason for the decline of modern civilization resides in its emphasis on the human too human sides, while neglecting entirely the human need to search for depth and to conquer its own interiority.

Both versions of over-civilization adopt the same approach towards the solution of the problem of the human: the ever expansion of social technology.

Horkheimer, *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft* (Frankfurt-am-Main: S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, 1967); *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, Eng. Trans. M. J. O'Connell and Others (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974).

²⁰ J. Patočka, "La surcivilization et son conflit", in *Liberté et sacrifice, op. cit.*, pp. 125-129.

Bourgeois liberalism treats human as atomic being and believes that the reinforcement of economic competition and development of forces of production are the best guarantee for the promotion of individual happiness and social harmony. Yet the results contradict the hope: life becomes extenuated, alienated and dehumanized. Socialism, on the other hand, starts from the diagnosis of the contradiction of bourgeois liberalism: human suffering is caused by exploitation and social injustice. It feels the need to abolish suffering. Like bourgeois liberalism, the unique means socialism employs is to intensify social technology, but in a direction diametrically opposite to that of bourgeois liberalism. What it succeeds to abolish is not suffering, but individuality, interiority, and depth. Humans are considered as simple moments of objective processes. Individuality is crushed under the gigantic state.

Patočka makes the very insightful critical observation that in a socialist state, one has the feeling of pleasure only during grandiose national festivals where one has the chance to feel the totality of the state. Yet in daily life, happiness is absent. Humans are as alienated and dehumanized as in bourgeois liberalism. In short, social technology is not the way to regeneration of civilization:²¹ Patočka's analysis and critique share those of the Frankfurt School.

c. Critique in the Sense of Foucault's History of the Present

This sense of critique needs some explanation. It is a kind of critique which is a diagnosis of the crisis of the present time in view of finding a way out leading towards the future. In some places Foucault calls it "history of the present" (*"l'histoire du présent"*),²² in some others "ontology of the present" (*"l'ontologie du présent"*),²³ or even "critical ontology of ourselves" (*"l'ontologie critique de nous-même"*).²⁴ Foucault declared that what inspired him to undertake such a critique was the late Kant, in particular the way Kant

²¹ Ibid., pp. 165-168.

²² Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 35; *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of Prison*, Eng. Trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 31.

²³ M. Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?", in *Dits et écrits, IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 687; Eng. trans. as "What is Revolution?", in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), p. 100. This article bears the same French title as the article mentioned in the next footnote, yet the contents of two versions are quite different.

²⁴ M. Foucault, „Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?", in *Dits et écrits, IV*, p. 577; Eng. version as "What is Enlightenment?", in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 50.

raised the question of “*Was ist Aufklärung?*” in the 1784 article that bears the same title.²⁵

Foucault points out that when Kant asked the question “What is Enlightenment?”, he directed his question towards the present epoch, the epoch in which Kant found himself and others.²⁶

The critique emerging out of this kind of questioning is neither animated by a purely theoretical and epistemological interest, as is the distinction and delimitation of human’s faculty of cognition in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Nor is it a critique purely directed towards the social and political order. It is one between the two: in the midst of the present epoch, we ask for a critical understanding of the epoch in which we find ourselves, and the critique follows the guiding thread of the cultural characteristic manifested by the concrete historical situation in which we are found. On the one hand, we do not adopt a subjugated attitude towards explanation or interpretation of the present epoch given by any political, religious or intellectual authority.²⁷

On the other hand, this kind of critical understanding does not bear a merely theoretical interest, it also carries within itself practical concerns: through the understanding of the limitation of the present epoch, it paves the way to getting out of its impasse and helps to search for new possibilities for the development of humanity.²⁸ Foucault even says that critique understood in this sense is the critical attitude itself: “it has to be conceived as an attitude, an *ethos*, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”²⁹ In other words, the critique advocated by Foucault is an anticipatory diagnosis on the cultural impasse of the present epoch in the hope of finding new possibilities to go beyond it.

In the light of the above elucidation of critique in the Foucaultian sense, it is without doubt that Patočka’s call for reflection on the problems concerning a Post-European humanity is a critique of this kind. In fact, if critique in the

²⁵ Kant’s *gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königl. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902-1938), Vol. VIII, pp. 33-42.

²⁶ M. Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?”, in *Dits et écrits, IV*, p. 679; “What is Revolution?”, in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, p. 84.

²⁷ M. Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que la critique? [Critique et Aufklärung]”, *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, Vol. LXXXIV, 1990, p. 39; Eng. Trans. as “What is Critique?”, in Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, op. cit., 31-32.

²⁸ M. Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?”, *Dits et écrits, IV*, p. 577; *The Foucault Reader*, p. 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Foucaultian sense is sometimes named “history of the present” and sometimes “critical ontology of ourselves”, it is precisely because the structure of history bears an essential relationship to the ontological structure of our existence. From Heidegger onwards, we understand that historical happening requires an agent whose ontological structure possesses a temporal character.

While Foucault himself did not explain why he used alternately the terms “history of the present” and “critical ontology of ourselves” to designate the critical attitude he advocated, it was Patočka who, in a lecture entitled “Spiritual Foundations of Contemporary Life” delivered in 1969,³⁰ i.e., fifteen years earlier than Foucault’s lecture on “What is Enlightenment?” in effect provided the necessary missing link between Foucault’s two expressions. Drawing on Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein in *Sein und Zeit*, Patočka provides the ontological explication of the possibility of critique as history of the present from the explication of the structure of human existence: it is the ontological structure of ourselves as human—Heidegger calls it “the Dasein in us”—which is at the basis of the critical attitude rendering possible the history of the present in the Foucaultian sense. Patočka says:

It becomes evident that human is not simply there, but that she/he has a *mission* and a duty with regard to all those who do not have the privilege acquired from now on: the privilege of the fascination by the totality and by Being, by this primordial interest which is the source of all light. Human here becomes the one who is sent into the world in order to witness truth, to attest by each of her/his acts and entire behavior, to help to come to oneself anyone who is in the same manner as her/his, to let humans to be according to what they are, in light and in truth, to offer herself/himself to things and to beings as a ground where they can deploy themselves, and not to exploit them brutally for the profit of her/his arbitrary interests.³¹

It is by virtue of the critical understanding of our present historical situation that the possibility of a future is opened to us. Thus Patočka speaks of the possibility of reconquering *hope* (the term “hope” is emphasized by Patočka

³⁰ J. Patočka, “Les fondements spirituels de la vie contemporaine”, in *Liberté et sacrifice*, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-241.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235.

himself in the text) in the present epoch, an epoch in which the European spirit is dominated by the horror generated by the wars. He declares:

It is thus certain that the efforts done in order to turn at last our attention away from this terror, to let ourselves be penetrated and supported by the great tasks which call for us, if we listen to the situation of our epoch in the spheres of action, of knowledge and of art, these efforts have a positive meaning, even if we should neither neglect their limits. We see the constitution of philosophies and theologies of hope. Hope is not a simple *relief* of the horror and of the fear which the dangers inspire us, dangers to which our epoch is exposed, but the very possibility of opening us to a future. Generally speaking, the discovery of the future is one of the most important and most characteristic features of our present.³²

Just as for Foucault, Kant for Patočka is the philosopher who first understands reflection upon the present and on time provides us with the possibility of opening towards the future.³³ Yet time is only the formal, even if ontological, condition of the futuristic character of the history of the present. Where can we search for the historical substances which allow us to hope for the possibility of going beyond the limits of the present epoch? Patočka observes that the present epoch is the age of the end of European domination at the aftermath of the wars. It is comprised of two essential features: the decomposition of the Hegelian conception of the sovereign state—this conception being a doctrine founded upon the modern philosophy of subjectivity—as well as the rapid propagation of planetary technology.

Upon the observation of the end of European domination as well as the possibilities and the dangers of the rapid propagation of planetary technology diagnosed after Heidegger, Patočka projects the hope of filling the formal structure of universal history by “the pluralism ... of different historical substances”, “a phenomenon which could be revealed to be more profound and more revolutionary than we think today.”³⁴ By the very concept of “the pluralism of different historical substances”, Patočka has gone beyond Foucault’s merely formal concept of history of the present. But at the same time

³² Ibid., p. 235.

³³ Ibid., p. 235.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 223-224.

Patočka's meditations on universal history and its futuristic possibilities draw him into the troubled water of the meaning of history.

III. Post-European Humanity and the Aporia of the Meaning of History

But would the apparent optimism of Patočka's philosophy of hope diminish its critical potential? He is well aware of this. This is because the hope projected upon "the pluralism of different historical substances" depends on a crucial question: Whether we can still bestow a comprehensible unity of meaning on the history of the henceforth plural and heterogeneous humanity? If the emergence of the concept of universal history since the European Enlightenment is always accompanied by a Eurocentric (because Christian) response to the question of the meaning of history, given that this meaning is lost forever—a verdict was pronounced by European thinkers themselves since Nietzsche and Weber—can we still speak of the meaning of history? Does this term—the meaning of history—still have possibilities of meaning-fulfillment?

This formidable question pushes Patočka to undertake a thorough and painstaking critical reflection on human history of which the *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* is the result: "The experience of the lost of meaning leads to the question whether all meaning is not anthropocentric and relative to life. If that were the case, we would be facing nihilism... Such a shaking of meaningfulness can only lead to the stagnation of life unless we can find a way out of the denial of meaning."³⁵

In the face of the very real threat of nihilism, Patočka pushes his critical reflection to an extremely radical position. He asks: can we still exercise our responsibility of truth and meaning in the extreme situation of meaninglessness and uprootedness? This is what he writes:

The possibility of a *metanoesis* of historic proportions depends essentially on this: is that part of humanity which is capable of understanding what was and is the point of history, which is at the same time ever more driven by the entire positioning of present day humanity at the peak of technoscience to accept responsibility for meaninglessness, also capable of the discipline and self-denial

³⁵ J. Patočka, *Essais hérétiques sur la philosophie de l'histoire*, p. 87; *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 76.

demanded by a stance of uprootedness in which alone a meaningfulness, both absolute and accessible to humans, because it is problematic, might be realized?³⁶

Patočka does not give any direct answer to the formal question of the meaning of history. In fact, if he wants to remain faithful to the phenomenological philosopher who he always is, he must abstain from giving an answer in a dogmatic manner. But we cannot live without meaning. Thus he reformulates the question and asks it again in relation to the decline of industrial civilization: “Is industrial civilization (as a whole and in its character as a scientific and technological revolution) decadent?”³⁷ At first sight the answer to this question should be easy. Patočka’s lucidity would drive him to say yes, since we can easily observe that industrial civilization “did not resolve the great, principal human ... problem, namely, not only to live but to live in a humanly authentic way, as history shows we can, but that it has actually made the situation more difficult”.³⁸

Yet at the bottom of this planetary distress with regard to the dehumanization of humanity, Patočka does not want to abandon hope forever. He wants to give hope a last chance: “On the other hand, it is also true that this civilization *makes possible* more than any previous human constellation: a life without violence and with far-reaching equality of opportunity. Not in the sense that this goal would anywhere be actual, but humans have never before found the means of struggle with external misery, with lack and want, which this civilization offers.”³⁹ This last reversal of the mind helps Patočka to formulate an answer this time, not to the more concrete question of whether industrial civilization will be in decline, but to the more formal, metaphysical question of the meaning of history: “History is nothing other than the shaken certitude of pre-given meaning. It has no other meaning or goal.”⁴⁰ In other words, we can only say that history always reserves us a surprise, and this is a delightful version of skepticism. Again, phenomenological lucidity is Patočka’s answer.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid., p. 86/ 75-76.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 125/ 117.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 125-126/ 117.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 126/ 118.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ In the last chapter of the *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, in an ultimate effort to renew the discussion of the problem of the meaning of history, Patočka invents the expression “solidarity of the shaken” from the experience of those who returned from the front during the great wars. Yet the chapter ends again by an open question concerning the possibility of the meaning of history of western humanity: “Or does something open up to us therein of the

What enables Patočka to have such lucidity with regard to historical understanding is that he has benefited from the diagnoses of the crisis of European modernity by his two great phenomenological forerunners Husserl and Heidegger. In particular, Patočka has appropriated Heidegger's concept of truth as disclosure with regard to the understanding of crisis: crisis is the situation in which the sense or significance of that historical epoch is veiled to humans in that very historical epoch.⁴² Yet in comparison to both Husserl and Heidegger, Patočka's understanding of history is filled with social, political, and cultural concreteness and diversity. In complete contrast to the later Heidegger's reductionist reading of history as the history of Being, his reading of history is never an alibi of escape from the historical reality.

IV. Phenomenology of the Natural World and its Promise

If Patočka's phenomenological lucidity forbids him an assertive reply to the question of the possibility of a Post-European humanity, will the promise of hope for a non-Eurocentric philosophy of history remain simply a pious but empty one? It seems so in fact. But the hope lost on this side of Patočka's profound meditations can be gained back on the other side of his reflections—the meditations on a phenomenology of the natural world undertaken since the first book publication of Patočka in 1936: *The Natural World as Philosophical Problem*.⁴³ The elements of a phenomenology of the natural world worked out by Patočka since then can pave the way for the phenomenological movement, which is originated in the European soil, to encounter other cultures, hence for the hope to break out of the Eurocentric enclosure. It is of course impossible to carry out the task of a detailed presentation of Patočka's phenomenology of the natural world in the present essay. Here we can only sketch out some main points of Patočka's reflections.⁴⁴

- a. Patočka's idea of the phenomenology of the natural world converges with Merleau-Ponty's concept the primordial Nature but is further enriched by a

meaning of the history of western humanity which will not be denied and which today is becoming the meaning of human history as such?" Ibid., p. 146/ 137.

⁴² J. Patočka, "La surcivilization et son conflit", in *Liberté et sacrifice, op. cit.*, pp. 160-162.

⁴³ J. Patočka, *Le monde naturel comme problème philosophique*, French Trans. by H. Declève and M. Daněk (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1976).

⁴⁴ The following lines are largely indebted to the very informative article of Etienne Tassin, "La question du sol: monde naturel et communauté politique", in *Jan Patočka: philosophie, phénoménologie et politique*, ed. Etienne Tassin and Marc Richir (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1992), pp. 167-187.

reinterpretation of the ground of Aristotle's philosophy. It goes against the interpretation of the ground of Aristotle's philosophy as centered on *Metaphysics*, an interpretation imposed upon the history of European philosophy since the scholastic tradition. He suggests that the ground of Aristotle's philosophy should be re-centered from *Metaphysics* to *Physics*, because it is in the *Physics* that is found Aristotle's science of movement and of mobile being. According to Patočka, movement is not only one of the basic elements of a phenomenology of the natural world, but the principle of phenomenality:

Delimitation and disclosure can be subsumed under the global concept of manifestation. Movement is the ground of any manifestation. Now manifestation for Aristotle is not manifestation of something whose essence would remain in retreat. On the contrary, Being enters entirely into the phenomenon, because "to be" means nothing other than to determine a substrate; the determination of substrate is movement and movement resides precisely, as we just saw, in manifestation. Movement is thus that which grounds the identity of being and appearance.⁴⁵

- b. The cognition of movement as principle of phenomenality brings about the thematization of life and of human existence as movement on the one hand, and of the Earth as the ultimate referent of movement on the other. For if movement in the primordial sense, i.e., a movement lived from within, is the realizing flux of our accomplishing activities, the referent of such a flux is the Earth, which is a permanent and immobile substrate. "Immobility of the Earth belongs to the primordial orientation of the world."⁴⁶ "The Earth is the prototype of everything massive, corporeal, material; it is the universal body of which all things are in some sense a part."⁴⁷ Here Patočka is evidently inspired by Husserl's late manuscripts entitled "Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum Phänomenologischen Ursprung der Räumlichkeit der Natur" in which the founder of phenomenology declares the "Overthrow of

⁴⁵ J. Patočka, "La conception aristotélicienne du mouvement: signification philosophique et recherches historiques", in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l'existence humaine*, pp. 132-133.

⁴⁶ J. Patočka, "Le monde naturel et la phénoménologie", in *Ibid.*, p. 30; "The 'Natural' World and Phenomenology", in *Jan Patočka, Philosophy and Selected Writings*, Erazim Kohák (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 255..

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

- the Copernican theory in the usual interpretation of a world view. The original ark, earth, does not move.”⁴⁸
- c. The Earth as *physis* and primordial Nature: “Through the aspect of the Earth as the bearer and the referent of all relations we therefore also encounter the Earth as *a force and a power*.”⁴⁹ The Earth as power and master of life and death is the nutritive Earth.⁵⁰ In this sense, the Earth is *physis*, the primordial Nature. As such, the Earth is the principle of *genesis-phthora*, generation and corruption.⁵¹ The Earth as primordial Nature is the inchoative Nature.
 - d. Primacy of the practical over the theoretical within the natural world: “That which allows initial access to the natural world is not contemplative reflection, but reflection as integral part of the praxis, as component of action and interior behavior.”⁵²
 - e. The irruption of human existence as the movement of the human life constitutes an “earthquake”. It has neither motivation nor ground. It shows the abyssal nature of human existence and its primordial nothingness. “The Earth itself has been shaken. If we are grounded to qualify human being as inhabitant of the Earth, the Earth suffers an earthquake from human being. Here human being discovers her/his existence, not as accepted and rooted, but in her/his total nakedness—and she/he discovers at the same time that the Earth and the sky have the a *trans*, a beyond. This means also that there is

⁴⁸ Edmund Husserl, “Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum Phänomenologischen Ursprung der Räumlichkeit der Natur”, in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), p. 307; “Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature”, Eng. Trans. Fred Kersten, in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, ed. Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press and Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 231. In a succinct passage Husserl explains that “the ‘earth’ as the unitary earth-basis cannot be at rest and therefore cannot be experienced as a body which not only has its extension and its qualification but also its ‘place’ in space, and which can possibly exchange its place and be at rest or in motion. As long as I do not have a presentation of a new basis, as a basis from which the earth can have sense in interconnected and returning locomotion as a self-contained body in motion and at rest, and as long as an exchange of bases is not presented such that both bases become bodies, to that extent just the earth itself is the basis and not a body. The earth does not move... The earth as a whole whose parts ... are bodies; but as a ‘whole’ the earth is not a body.” Ibid., p. 313/ 225, translation modified.

⁴⁹ J. Patočka, “Le monde naturel et la phénoménologie”, in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, p. 30; “The ‘Natural’ World and Phenomenology”, in *Jan Patočka, Philosophy and Selected Writings*, p. 255.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 31/ 256.

⁵¹ J. Patočka, “Méditation sur *Le Monde naturel comme problème philosophique*”, in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, p. 103.

⁵² Ibid, p. 101.

nothing in them which can give existence a final support, a final rootedness, a final goal, a ‘why’ valid once and for all.”⁵³

The Earth as inchoative Nature of the primordial order, the emphasis on primordial nothingness and the abyssal nature of human existence, the primacy of praxis: these are themes that prepare the encounter between phenomenology and Chinese philosophy, in particular the *Tao* of Lao-Tzu. In Lao-Tzu’s *Tao-Te Ching* we read:

「道可道，非常道。」

The *Tao* that can be spoken of is not the constant *Tao*. (Ch. 1, p. 3)⁵⁴

「道之爲物，惟恍惟惚。惚兮恍兮，其中有象；恍兮惚兮，其中有物。窈兮冥兮，其中有精；其精甚真，其中有信。」

Compare to a thing, the *Tao* is shadowy and indistinct. Instinct and shadowy, yet within it is something that appears. Shadowy and indistinct, yet within it is something substantial. Dim and dark, yet within it is something essential. That essential thing is very real, within it is something that can be experienced. (Ch. 21, pp. 32-32)

「有物混成，先天地生；寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以爲天地母。吾不知其名，故強字之曰道。」

Something undifferentiated is formed, born before heaven and earth. Silent and void, it stands alone and does not change; proceeds in a circular way and does not corrupt, it is capable of being the mother of heaven and earth. I know not its name, thus naming it by the acceptable term of *Tao*. (Ch. 25, p. 37)

「無，名天地之始；有，名萬物之母。」

By Nothing(ness), we name the beginning of heaven and earth; by Being, we name the mother of the myriad things. (Ch. 1, p. 3)

「天下萬物生於有，有生於無。」

⁵³ J. Patočka, “Notes sure la préhistoire de la science du mouvement: le monde, la terre, le ciel et le mouvement de la vie humaine”, in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Chapter number and pagination refer to D. C. Lau’s translation of *Tao Te Ching*, bilingual edition (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1989).

The myriad things in the world are originated from Being, and Being from Nothing(ness). (Ch. 40, p. 61)

V. In the Place of a Conclusion

We all know that Lao-Tzu's conceptualization of nothing or nothingness has been mocked of by Hegel. In the eyes of the 19thc. Prussian King of philosophy, the *Tao* spoken of by Lao-Tzu is void, deprived of any intelligible content. Thus Chinese Taoism is relegated to the lowest position in Hegel's ladder of history of philosophy. With Patočka's thematization of the Earth as primordial Nature, of movement as principle of phenomenality, of the non-foundational nature of human existence as movement, the act of phenomenological seeing can now resolutely shake away the Eurocentric bias of both Hegel and Husserl.

Patočka's act is phenomenologically lucid, morally courageous, and politically heroic. So do the founders of the Patočka Archives, who, under the most risky conditions, succeeded to safeguard the philosophical legacy left behind by one of the most noble European spirits, a philosophical legacy which from then on can be shared by the "plurality of the Post-European Humanity". That all those who had participated in this gigantic work of protection, and foremost of them Professor Ivan Chvatik, receive our most sincere homage.