

## The “New” after Historical Catastrophes (Jan Patočka)

**Abstract:** The topic of “creation in history,” as developed by Jan Patočka in *Plato and Europe and Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, involves a passage from a strictly phenomenological perspective towards a critical philosophy of history. At the core of his project lies a radical dimension, called *care of the soul*, which represents the transformation of the mythical age into the historical one, through the simultaneous birth of philosophy, politics and history. In its inception, the “new” – grounded on the *care of the soul* – meant the triple articulation of the quest for truth, of community’s guiding principles, as well as of one’s internal life. The creation of the “new” after historical catastrophes preserves the fundamental dimension of the care of the soul, fully assuming the problematicity of history, restoring the sense of community and redefining political action under extreme crisis situations.

**Keywords:** philosophy of history, phenomenology, political action, care of the soul.

### 1. Phenomenology and philosophy of history

In *Plato and Europe* and in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Patočka emphasizes the manner in which “the historical new” can be born, in a context that has more affinities to the end of history than to its renewal. In order to develop the concept of “historical creation,” Patočka passes from a strictly phenomenological perspective towards a critical philosophy of history. The confrontation between *Plato and Europe* and *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* highlights the tension between a rather “classical” paradigm and a heretical one; between a model of thinking that reinforces “the new” in harmony with the inner unity of the soul and a model that considers “the new” as subservient to historical catastrophes, revealing itself only after the decline of history has fully reached its bottom. On the one hand, the soul remains in profound harmony with the realm of eternal ideas; on the other hand, the blind entanglement present in history captivates it.

The phenomenological paradigm mainly present in *Plato and Europe* does not allow a proper understanding for *the absolutely new*. The phenomenological “new” represents only a perspective-related new. This means in turn that

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the manner in which the world is given to us changes according to the perspective one is involved in: “Naturally, I can go back to the same thing, but my own internal perspective at the same time changes, and so forth. Yet at the same time this whole remains as it is. The fundamental, the grand, through which everything else only becomes what it is, endures. But this whole remains concealed” (Patočka 2002, 73).

The phenomenological “new” presupposes two distinct elements to deal with: the thing that appears, and this appearance itself. The phenomenological “new,” as an unconcealment of something previously hidden, is problematic in what the possibility of an “absolute creation” is concerned. The “new” means the manifestation and the disclosure of a preexistent element in a specific situation. Even if the situation changes, it offers only one perspective on a whole that remains irreducibly the same. This is the reason why manifestation is precisely the limit of Patočka’s phenomenological approach regarding the creation in history.

Consequently, I will analyze the Czech philosopher’s detachment from the purely phenomenological repetition towards a clearly articulated philosophy of history. This passage is accomplished both in *Plato and Europe* – through the concept of “creative destroying,” focused on the Platonic model of harmony of the soul – and in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, with an emphasis on the Heideggerian anxiety of a soul whose destiny is to face continuous historical turmoil<sup>1</sup>. *Heretical Essays* testifies for the conclusion that “the new” is born in catastrophes, and that a historical incipience is decided with every “heretical” dislodging.

In Patočka’s view (*Heretical Essays*), “heretic” is tied to heresy, *hairesis* as choice, election, preference, inclination, as well as divergence within a doctrine; it surpasses the objectivity of knowledge. Thus, the “new” represents the paradoxical reformulation of a historical catastrophe; the original paradigm is revealed after the “nadir of destruction” has been reached. It is a matter of “creating something new out of a catastrophe,” a heretical, practical decision that goes beyond any theoretical or thematic determination; it is tied to divergence, to *polemos* and strife.

This assumption leads to the conclusion that there is no neutral knowledge. Knowledge means understanding of a problematic and contradictory situation that cannot become a historical lesson, unless through the acceptance of its inherent strife.

This beginning then reaches out to future historical outreach, especially by teaching what humankind does not wish to comprehend, in spite of all immense hardness of history, does not want to understand, something that

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<sup>1</sup> Edward F. Findlay’s interpretation in *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age* states that the main difference between the two versions consists in their Platonic emphasis (harmony of the soul) and the Heideggerian one (anxiety).

perhaps only later days will learn after reaching the nadir of destruction and devastation – that life need be understood not from the viewpoint of the *day*, of life merely accepted, but also from the view of strife, of the night, of *polemos*. The point of history is not what can be uprooted or shaken, but rather the openness to the shaking (Patočka 1996, 44).

Knowledge means also embracing the historicity of the world. Historical understanding of creation is more fundamental for Patočka in *Heretical Essays*<sup>2</sup> than a purely aesthetic one. In his view, art in its archaic form represents only one possibility of inserting oneself into the world; it is not the most original one, because it is not necessarily centered on “humans.” In the glosses of *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, the author defends the co-originary of philosophy, history and politics in “revealing what there is.” Myth, religion, poetry are left aside or rather placed in a secondary position because they “do not speak out of an awareness of the problem but prior to it, out of fervor, enthusiasm – outright divine ‘possession.’” Philosophy speaks from an awareness of the problematic nature to the problematic awareness” (Patočka 1990, 142). Philosophy is given a primordial role because it involves a process of life renewal, as something that has to be carried out.

In this respect, Patočka’s account in *Heretical Essays* coincides with the argument developed in *Plato and Europe*: the “new” is a creation, an “awakening from dream into reality”: “a new creation, as when a person wakes from a dream into reality and cannot sleep again” (Patočka 2002, 76). This is the way Patočka describes “the particular shock” caused by philosophy (Anaximander and Heraclitus), which in its turn was compelled to create a world that would accept it and that would allow those who practiced it to survive. Therefore, the world itself suffered a radical change. It would no longer need to reject its philosophers in order to perpetuate its integrity and in order to protect itself against the “new truth” advocated by them.

That is the city where Socrates and those like him will not need to die. For this a world of experience is needed; for this a plan of *what is truth* is needed, an outline of all of being. For this a city must be planned out. What is its essence, and what the soul is capable of must be examined. That is the meaning of the figure of Socrates (Patočka 2002, 88).

The paradigm embodied by Socrates – representing the beginning of a new epoch – testifies for a dimension of the soul, which presupposes at the same time the quest for truth, the reformulation of community’s guiding

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the case with his late contributions, where he reconsiders the contemporary art. See in this respect Jan Patočka, *L’art et le temps*.

principles, as well as the internal life of those who accomplish this interrogation, defined as *care of the soul*. In other words, the novelty brought by the Greek polis, through debates on radical notions such as justice, good, and beauty, articulates the triple dimension (cosmological, political and philosophical) of the *care of the soul*.

This model configures, according to Patočka, the entire structure of the European civilization. The whole history of the European “soul” – a movement of the soul towards its own being, a freedom taking the form of political “solidarity of the shaken,” – reframes the possibility of new creations after historical catastrophes, given that the inheritance remains alive. After the catastrophe of the Greek polis, the new represents the state of justice founded on *looking-in*; after the catastrophe of the Greek cities, the “Roman monarchy emerged as the last great Hellenistic power” (Patočka 2002, 88).

The main problem raised by the argument developed in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* centers on the possibility for a “new creation” to emerge after the self-consumption of the European project in the two suicidal wars of the twentieth century. This “new” manifests as a matter of the “solidarity of the shaken but undaunted,” announced as the “shaking of naïve meaning,” “the genesis of a perspective on an absolute meaning... on condition that humans are prepared to give up hope of a directly given meaning and to accept meaning as a way” (Patočka 1996, 77). What is astonishing in Patočka’s work is the fact that in a “postmodern” era<sup>3</sup>, he does not give up the understanding of the “new” as a quest for an absolute meaning.

## 2. *Care of the soul* and Patočka’s concept of history

In order to understand the inheritance that Patočka refers to, and which is spread throughout two thousands years of European history, we should investigate first of all his concept of history.

Whereas in *Plato and Europe* Patočka embraces Heidegger’s conception of history as not progressing empirically, because of the inherent character of fallenness present in history, in the last two texts<sup>4</sup> from *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, the Czech philosopher presents a version of history “on the frontline.” He investigates the modality in which history reemerges after

<sup>3</sup> See in this respect the insightful discussion about two versions of postmetaphysical discourse regarding truth and freedom in Petr Lom, “East Meets West—Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty on Freedom: A Czech Philosopher Brought into Dialogue with American Postmodernism”.

<sup>4</sup> See Jan Patočka, “Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?” and “Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War” in *Heretical Essays*.

"historical catastrophes" and the mechanisms that can restore meaning after a period when all meaning seems to have succumbed to disasters.

For Heidegger, history can only be an "ever-repeated rising out of fallenness" (Kohák 1989, 335). This fallenness is not obvious; it can hide beneath the mask of progress, of humanism and of power. Fallenness is inherently connected to human historical condition. It can never be entirely surpassed or left aside. It is not synonymous with decadence, with decay from a previously flourishing status, but it is tied to a perennial aspect of our condition: we are entangled in the "blind" game of history, on which initially we have no influence. We find ourselves "thrown" in a world that is not shaped upon our measure. World has its own measure. This is the reason why we are "thrown," "fallen" in history. From this "fallenness" we are repeatedly awakened by our vigilance, attention, voices of conscience that lead us to ourselves, that make us become ourselves. It is a kind of understanding, of *looking-in* that shapes the configuration of the world we inhabit. It becomes evident that the Heideggerian phenomenological perspective, also present in *Plato and Europe*, is based on repetition.

On the contrary, in order to understand Patočka's own historical attempt, we should investigate his "heretical" notions, such as phenomenology of darkness, *polemos* as perpetual struggle, as a way of restoring meaning, his idea that the philosophy of history should start from the assumption that peace is only a blessed island, a fragile balance in an ocean of conflict. In this respect, *Heretical Essays* develop an idea of history "on the frontline," because the essay attempts to paradoxically restore meaning out of events that presumably trigger no hope and no revival.

In principle, Patočka believes that there are several "perpetual mobiles" that push humankind forward. One of them is nature's most powerful mobile, the impetus to survive, or life preservation. Even though this is the undoubted input of mobility, progress and ascension, life preservation is not at all susceptible of creating history. On the contrary, it is rejected as belonging to the period of prehistory, characterizing what Patočka calls *acceptance*.

Besides *acceptance*, which defines our natural condition, Patočka mentions two other movements of existence: *defense* – characterized by a continuous alternation of burden and relief, of oppression and alleviation – and *truth*.<sup>5</sup> These three movements are equated with the Aristotelian three souls (vegetative, animate and rational), as well as with Hannah Arendt's three movements of life: labor, work and action.

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<sup>5</sup> See Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, as well as "The 'Natural' World and Phenomenology," "Care and the Three Movements of Human Life," and "The Three Movements of Human Life".

The quest for *truth* implies a distance and a reaction, being the main impetus that fully accomplishes the passage towards the historical phase in the evolution of humankind. A very restricted form of the quest for truth existed also before the historical phase, and could be identified according to specific attributes: quest for the divine, microcosmos-macrocosmos unity, wisdom, serenity, and self-acceptance when facing death. But a conscious, elaborated quest for truth, based on awareness of problemat�city and acceptance of the fallible, is a specific feature of a determined phase in the development of humankind: the historic phase. Therefore, history manifests as a rupture.

When distinguishing between the two understandings of life's meaning, we could say that the prehistorical quest for truth embodies the dual equation familiar-threatening, whose goal is to secure a sheltered life, whereas the historical quest centers on the equation life worth living- mere life, whose aim is to define truth, which gives value to life. A life centered on the quest for truth manifests as an unsheltered life, which generates history.

However, let us reconsider the specific tension posed by prehistory. The Czech philosopher points out that even in prehistoric times, there is a mythical tension that engenders a specific type of quest. This represents the tension between familiar and threatening, between what is closest to us, at hand, and what is distanced, obscure, unknown. Patočka focuses initially on the Greek model, but extends this mythic tension to other civilizations. This pattern (familiar-threatening) could be recognized in all mythical forms of life, not only in the Greek ones. Not being centered on a specific "methodology" of the quest for truth, all these civilizations attempt to secure themselves against the unsettling power of the unknown. They envisage sheltering the familiar. Patočka provides the example of the Japanese theater, which represents on the scene "the foreign, the vagabond, the strange within the rooted, basically traditional peasant world" (Patočka 2002, 54). Shortly put, this duality is characterized as the opposition between the night – the strange, *das Unheimliche* – and the day – the domestic, the well known, the familiar.

Furthermore, the Czech philosopher analyzes the mythological figure of Oedipus, who embodies the entire nature of the mythical world: men are blind and wandering on this earth. The gods are the only figures in the mythical world who possess clarity. Oedipus is the messenger between the two worlds, because he is both "damned and sacred." Other tropes, through which the mythical duality is configured, besides the couple familiar-threatening, are *blindness and clarity*, which delineate the distance between a limited and an all-encompassing perspective on the world. The understanding of this equation in terms of truth presupposes that this truth is not conceived only according to human measure, but it belongs also to a

process of initiation within the mystery of another world. On the contrary, the philosophic truth, made possible by the historic paradigm, is a self-centered truth, where the two worlds refocus on the human being and on the *care of the soul*. Truth presupposes a condition of exception, acquired as the result of an intense and constant discipline of the soul – a thaumaturgy, an art healing for a life otherwise threatened by decadence.

In the mythical world, this condition of exception was reached through daimonic participation. *Daimon* configures a space of irresponsibility, a space of crossing borders between the human, the animal and the divine, being connected to what Patočka calls “undifferentiated night,” where “one does not yet hear the call to explain oneself, one’s actions, one’s thoughts, to respond to the other and answer for oneself before the other” (Patočka 2002, 5). Daimonic participation, as a form of quest for truth, has few affinities with the quest for truth, which characterizes the philosophical project.

Within the mythical world, Oedipus plays the role of the messenger between the two worlds, embodying the possibility that the border between them be transgressed. Even though he is the errant particle in the community, he does not challenge the established order. Being an extreme case, he reconfirms in fact the rules of the world he will be excluded from, due to his transgression. He testifies for the fact that human beings are not capable of attaining knowledge, in spite of their good intentions. Thus, Oedipus represents the incarnation of the eternal truth: men are mortals, subdued to fatal errors; only gods possess knowledge: “He leaves banished from the community; but at the same time, because he is the one in whom was shown this whole mystery of human revealedness, because he is this two-sided creature, of dual meaning, a creature who is both damned and sacred” (Patočka 2002, 49). In other words, in the mythical world, the state of exception, the connection with the purer world of knowledge, is attained through transgression; the price paid is blindness, restlessness, and exclusion from community. The coexistence between the damned and the sacred is at the same time due to the fact that the quest for truth in the mythical world signifies the quest for supra-human wisdom.

A radical novelty occurred within the mythical world once the quest for truth had taken the form of a wisdom centered on man, on its mortal condition and on finding a modality to counterpart this glamourless situation. According to Patočka, the solution this new epoch offers is shaped according to a triple configuration: philosophy, politics and history. It is not by chance that they manifest their incipience during the same epoch. On the contrary, the coexistence of the three dimensions becomes possible due to the fact that a new configuration of the human emerges, based on the problematic, on the conscientious anticipation of death and acceptance of finitude.

Therefore, the first “new” in history was declared together with the passage from the mythical age to the philosophical one, through the simultaneous birth of history, of philosophy and of politics. For Patočka, philosophy is important, because it embodies human freedom as *care of the soul*. At the same time, due to the fact that the continuous investigation on a life-worth-living does not take place solely within a private space, it is extended at the level of the entire community, which also questions the manner in which a just society and a just state can be constituted; it interrogates the possibility to simultaneously lead and protect a community and moreover, it analyzes its governing principles. And not in the least, this interrogation, named by Patočka *care of the soul*, also gives birth to a historical conscience, which acknowledges the fact that the intricate game of events belongs to the human decision and that this acknowledgement is frightening. The first “new” in history manifests as an attentive, though disruptive *care of the soul*, which at the same time gives birth to philosophy, to politics and to historical conscience. In this respect, both *Plato and Europe* and *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* coincide.

### 3. *Care of the soul and polemos*

In order to understand this first “new” in history, we should investigate at the same time the core dimension that configures it, namely *care of the soul*.

*Care of the soul* is the magnificent dimension that shaped the cosmological, social and internal space of Greek society and its individuals. How should we understand it, so that it does not become a simple metaphor? And moreover, what is its relevance for the contemporary world? How can we apply it in our age of a powerful “hypercivilization” that supersedes all classic categories and modes of thinking?

According to Patočka, *care of the soul* permeates the entire Western history. Even though it can hardly be detected within the characteristic features of contemporary world, what is remarkable is that Patočka attempts to synthesize the entire historical nucleus of Western humanity in a philosophical dimension. Moreover, the fact that *care of the soul* can no longer be considered as a major attribute of our world is due to a fundamental shift, which happened during the sixteenth century. It laid the foundations for a saga of an increasing expanding power that, in its turn, transmuted the accent from “to be” towards “to have.”

Patočka’s argument is that, even though nowadays the problematic situation of Western civilization is characterized by its “disunited and enormous power” (Patočka 2002, 9), it initially started as a unitary project, as an attempt to join together what is most valuable in the rank of being with “the almost nothing,” the Being and the beings. It rose above



decadence as the first courageous trial of death<sup>6</sup>, against any preconceived meaning, against all religious models that imposed upon humans outer, non-human norms. For Patočka, decadence refers to all that is inhuman, which destroys the roots of life through submersion in unquestioned superstitions.

*Care of the soul* challenged the ancient world by embracing an attitude that would no longer be of acceptance, but of defense, of defeating the unknown and scary. Among the three movements of human existence – acceptance, defense, truth –, defense constitutes the passage towards a new form of truth, defined through the struggle against decadence, against death, which renders the soul a form of immortality, here and now, differing radically from the mythical world. Through the trial of death, the new configuration of the soul acquires its triple articulation: philosophical, political and historical.

This understanding of struggle represents the most important meaning of *polemos*, as used by Patočka. The struggle of *polemos* triggers at the same time freedom, which in turn signifies that *care of the soul* essentially means freedom. The quest for truth, accomplished as a courageous trial of death, liberates the human being from the fear of death, from the unknown; and consequently offers itself as freedom. This freedom does not equal unconditioned acting according to one's wishes, but rather liberation from the fundamental fear that had overwhelmed the mythical times: fear of death. Which is not to say that the historical man does not know the fear of death. Rather, that he found a modality to counter-part it through this attentive *care of the soul*, which in turn can lead to a conflict with the community – a strong preserver of the old, with pre-established norms and survival mechanisms. The conflict, *polemos*, is triggered by the requirements posed by the intense *care of the soul*, which gives birth to a new form of humanity; *polemos* is by no means a practical wisdom guide. As Patočka points out: "I did not speak about conflict as about some kind of universal guide, to assume something like this is precisely what we must guard against" (Findlay 1999, 241).

Therefore *polemos* should not be understood as something to be wanted, but rather as a consequence of an attitude that embraces history in its problematicity. In this respect, E. Findlay writes in his commentary about Patočka's notion of *polemos*: "The vision of Heraclitus is a relevant parallel, then, in the sense that it is only through an understanding of life as problematic, as characterized by a lasting struggle rather than an everlasting peace, that humans can hope to experience freedom" (Findlay 1999, 144).

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<sup>6</sup> Trial of death originated in early Greek times, when death was confronted directly, instead of being approached through prehistorical wisdom.

Patočka underlines the fact that history should be conceived as a permanent source of conflicts. This is its inherent structure of existence. In the absence of this understanding, we cannot but perpetuate the illusion that peace represents the general norm and conflict is the exception, whereas in fact, inscribed within the very existence of the historic, the problematic emerges in the form of conflict.

Under these circumstances, why should we accept the pact of history, of the “new” introduced by history? Why trade peace against freedom; and certainties in exchange for problematicity? Why should a human being make this exchange? Why choose problematicity as ground for a conception that can be unified only through the *care of the soul*?

Patočka’s response is very clear in this respect: problematicity is the condition *sine qua non* of a form of humanity that deeply embraced history, which means a humanity that counts life in freedom as superior to mere life. It is a form of achieving a solid, though not immortal, ground for an existence otherwise threatened by collapse and disintegration. This solid ground represents the coherent articulation of a project that embraces all important dimensions of human existence: cosmological, political, and historical.

Patočka describes Plato’s unifying project, his source of inspiration, as follows: “...In Plato’s work the care of the soul is applied in three directions: First, in the general layout of being and existence... the cosmos is the beatified spirit and all its parts are the harmonic parts of its structure...The other is how the care of the soul is applied in the plan of life in the community, in our common-historical life” (Patočka 2002, 109). Eventually, the soul is the coalescing centre of spiritual life, of the inner life of a person.

Being the natural prolongation of the intense caring of the soul, the Greek state in the time of Plato is a state in which the philosopher does not need to perish. This means in turn that it is shaped such as to comply with the principle of existence of philosophy.

Moreover, as a unitary metaphor, *care of the soul* allows also for an authentic political action. The way political action was conceived in its incipient form relied on the guardians, those able to guard and protect the community, those awake to possible injustices resulting from ignorance or bad will. The most interesting attribute of these guardians, or men of insight, is the fact that they remain in the field of extreme human possibilities. They represent the most accurate embodiment of human finitude, by perfectly knowing the opposition between clarity and blind wandering, between night and day. The guardians are endowed with courage, but this courage is not a blind one. It is regulated by what Patočka calls the *looking-in*. “To be courageous means to know when I have to risk my life and when I have to threaten others... these people have to be

especially educated, they have to be a paradoxical combination of the man of extreme insight and extreme risk" (Patočka 2002, 118). Those continuously examining what the good means, examining the internal speech of the intellect and the external speech of the community, are the actual political beings. Placed at the limits of human possibilities, they know what acting politically means.

Under these conditions, the most important assumption is that the guardians, as exceptional cases, are capable to recognize both terms of the equation: "clarity" and "blind wandering," the good and the evil. Acting historically, politically does not mean anymore exclusion from community, as "damned and sacred," but rather signifies a modality of being prepared for acts that generate the new, due to a courageous *looking-in*. As a result of the *care of the soul*, the community is now shaped according to the human measure.

A mythical figure can act as well. But the difference between an acting pre-historical being and an acting historical, i.e. political being is that the latter can create the "new" in history, by possessing the capacity to overcome decadence, to be the guardian of a possibility of being that defends falling back into inhumane realities.

#### 4. Political action

Patočka's perspective on the community of those who understand history is influenced by his political experience. Nevertheless, it is also shaped by two other important accounts:

1. Firstly, the acknowledgement of the end of metaphysics and the evidence that we are living in a postmetaphysical, increasingly technological age.<sup>7</sup>

2. The second account starts from the presupposition – present also in different other texts written by the Czech philosopher – that the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have lived extreme nihilistic possibilities (Patočka 1993, 254).

Moreover, the conviction that the world is incoherent and cannot be framed by our rational attempts leaves us with only three possibilities that have existed since the beginning of the history of thought. Patočka presents these possibilities in his essay "L'homme spirituel et l'Intellectuel."

The first one is Socrates' attitude, social involvement, even though it leads to the demonstration that the world is problematic, obscure, not owned by us. By assuming such a stance, Socrates defies and enters into conflict with public opinion, and is sent to death. The second possibility is

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<sup>7</sup> About postmetaphysics see Petr Lom, "East Meets West—Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty on Freedom: A Czech Philosopher Brought into Dialogue with American Post-modernism", as well as Paul Howard, "Openness to the Truth".

offered by Plato himself: the “interior immigration,” the retreat from the public arena, the avoidance of any conflict with the community but, at the same time, the establishment of a new, spiritual community, where philosophers would not need to die. The third possibility is to proclaim the relativity of all goods, values, ideas, in other words to become a sophist. There are no other possibilities left.

Patočka insists that these three attitudes are the *only* possibilities offered to a spiritual man, who looks for a meaningful life.

Patočka himself embodied to a large extent the first paradigm, social involvement, which he considers to be the vital nerve of a community. He thinks that philosopher’s separation from society is destructive. Until 1977, when he signed *Charter 77*, the declaration of human rights in Czechoslovakia, the philosopher defended a type of underground Academy, detached from the *polis*. Eventually, at the end of his life, he definitively concluded that his choice was the Socratic one, involving sacrifice: “The true person, the philosophical man, cannot be a philosopher only for himself; rather he must exist in society ... in society with others, because in the end no one wrenches himself loose from this situation” (Patočka 2002, 269).

To exist in society, “in society with others.” involves a decision and a dilemma, especially when dealing with “difficult times,” as those lived by Patočka. Existing in a totalitarian society and at the same time maintaining one’s principles and beliefs presupposes an act of courage, on the threshold of sacrifice, especially when the two dimensions face each other in a fatal conflict.

Under these conditions, Patočka takes the risk of affirming that those who understand history should equally understand darkness, which underscores political realities. Darkness and night mean for Patočka on the one hand the threat of falling back into the „undifferentiated night;” on the other hand, “darkness” stems from the acknowledgement that it cannot be fully overcome in the name of peace.

An eschatology of the day is, in Patočka’s view, as dangerous as a dogmatized nihilism, because it sacrifices life in freedom for mere life, in the name of progress and technology.

The victory of mere life, the sacrificing of everything in the name of mere life proves its fallacy when confronted with the idols of an anti-metaphysical age. For Patočka, darkness means the evocation of mystery, whereas day could also mean progress at any rate. Day stands for addiction to mere life and consequently for the return to a prehistorical phase of humanity. On the contrary, darkness could also signify uncertainty and problematicity, obscured or downgraded by Christian and Enlightenment symbolism, which prefer light and peace over dark and night: “Darkness, it is noted, is the basic condition out of which light or knowledge first arises. It was with the progressive development of metaphysics, Patočka claims

that darkness came to be viewed as merely an absence of light, that problematicity came to be seen as a condition to be rejected, to be overcome" (Findlay 1999, 144).

This is the reason why this opposition and its reversal compared to the classic hierarchy (day, light as having preeminence over night, darkness) lead to the difficulty of interpreting Patočka. It caused Paul Ricœur to call *Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War* a frankly shocking essay (Patočka 1996, viii).

We cannot understand this claim without referring to the entire background starting from which Patočka built his theory on the possibility to act politically in difficult times, which in turn means the possibility of triggering beginnings even where the public realm seems to be crippled by sclerosis.

Consequently, to answer the question "how is 'the new' possible in history?" requires the necessity to address another issue, regarding *the significance of acting politically*.

Patočka's conception of "the new" in history reaches in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* the tones of a lucid restoration of meaning, which rejects the idea of an end to history.

Modern civilization suffers not only from its own flows and myopia but also from the failure to resolve the entire problem of history. Yet the problem of history may not be resolved, it must be preserved as a problem. Today the danger is that knowing so many particulars, we are losing the ability to see the questions and that which is their foundation (Patočka 1996, 118).

The concept of history as insolvable triggers the acknowledgement that a meaningful political action should reframe its ground perpetually. A lucid restoration of meaning should start from the presupposition that there is no definitive foundation that could be given once and for all. Consequently, if anticipated by an attentive *care of the soul*, historical catastrophes are able to engender "the new" through repeated creative destructions.

In this context, Patočka gives the example of such an incipient "creative destruction": Europe as political reality was created in two waves, based on two wreckages: that of the Greek *polis* and that of the Roman Empire. Common to these two wreckages is a central notion that eventually served as the spiritual scaffolding of Western civilization: the idea of the universal state, universal religion, social reconciliation and reconciliation among different nations. In Patočka's view, all these elements are rooted in the central idea of the *care of the soul*, due to the fact that it presupposes universality and unity. Patočka attempts to demonstrate that, compared to other civilizations, the European project preserves a feature easily detectable throughout all subsequent historic occurrences, even if they presuppose errant manifestations (Inquisition, the religious absolutism of the Middle

Agnes and the Crusades, the devastating expansion towards the New World and its consequences, the two World Wars, the atomic bomb): the European unity is based on *care of the soul*, which is gradually dissolved into “historical catastrophes.”

## 5. Europe’s disintegration and Patočka’s answer

According to Patočka, *care of the soul* is the embryo of Western civilization, dispatched through a different impetus that started especially in the sixteenth century: the domination of the world. Supported by an increasingly technological power, this drive triggered what Patočka calls the final suicides from the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

What is the landscape of Europe’s disintegration of caring for the soul? And moreover, what is the possibility of conceiving “the new” under these circumstances? First of all, the creation of the new means fully *assuming the problematicity of history*; then, restoring the sense of *community as “solidarity of the shaken.”* It does not necessarily involve reinventing political structures, active dissidence or violent steps supporting human rights. On the contrary, Patočka talks about sacrifice as counter to the ontological foundation of the technological worldview. In other words, he tries to *redefine political action* under extreme crisis situations that involve a burst of superabundant energy. For Patočka, this superabundant energy, political morality and political action are always put in relation to something that holds them accountable, that transcends them, without configuring an objectified metaphysics.

In *Plato and Europe*, the converging element, *care of the soul*, implies repetition. Patočka argues: “But how to find eternity in a world of decline... in a world fundamentally characterized by temporal decline? ...We have to say what is, again, over and over, and always in a different way, but it always has to be the same thing” (Patočka 2002, 90). In *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, the converging element is endangered both by historical catastrophes and by a perseverant conviction regarding the lack of mystery, the lack of inquiry into what is worth living. The philosopher acknowledges the *power of the day* as equally capable of destroying through either an apocalypse of boredom or through the eschatology of mere life, life as the highest good.

When talking about the actual state of mankind, Patočka characterizes it as a silent war in the name of peace. Peace means everydayness, the

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<sup>8</sup> According to Patočka, the European project collapsed following the two World Wars. Other thinkers consider the “post-European” era to be a consequence of the “crisis” already announced by Husserl. See also: Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy* (1936/54), Jan Patočka, *L’Europe après l’Europe*, Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, Marc Crépon, *Altérités de l’Europe*.

victorious powers of the technologic progress, the lack of mystery, leading eventually to meaninglessness: "What triumphs, though, in this ruthless struggle is again Force, using peace as a means of combat, so that peace itself becomes a part of war, that deceptive stage which defeats the adversary without a shot" (Patočka 1996, 127).

At the core of this "silent war in the name of peace" stands undoubtedly the most important mobile of modern age: technology.

In both his articles "The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger" and "Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?", Patočka addresses extensively the issue of technology as the touchstone of a "decadent age" of "calculable resources," of the "utmost possible performance" (Kohák 1989, 335), of an unaccustomed unfolding of power," sustained through contradiction, dissension and conflict.

Patočka discusses both Heidegger's and Husserl's opinions on technology, even if they differ in their understanding of our technologic age. Although Husserl complains about the draining of meaning that results from an exclusive mathematical-scientific project, he is deeply convinced that rigorous science and induction could heal the spiritual crisis by giving access to a direct insight. Heidegger, by contrast, believes that the crisis prompted by technological domination is a part of a new meaning of being that cannot be avoided; and indeed, this is Patočka's conclusion as well.

Nevertheless, Patočka addresses the question of decadence in our civilization (Patočka 1996, 95-119) and he gives it two alibis: first of all, despite the fact that it is shaped by a profound boredom, this civilization makes possible a life without violence, with equality of opportunity. Moreover, it cannot simply be labeled as decadent, since its spiritual roots go back far-away in time. Its decadence is at the most the result of previous ages.

Starting from the historical background presented so far, I will address directly the main question of this paper: what are the chances, according to Patočka, for a "new" beginning, taking into account the bleak outlook of contemporary civilization?

1. Firstly, this new beginning involves taking the Socratic risk of involvement, by striving for a life of truth and *care of the soul*.

2. Secondly, it means attempting to find an alternative to the persistent calculation of the technological world. Patočka insists on the sacrifice dimension, which in different situations can have an increasing transformative power. Sacrifice means a gain by voluntary loss, by establishing a difference of order. If the fundamental issue of contemporary world is irrational consumption, then sacrifice would act counter to the increased possibilities of supply, by focusing on a form of effective political act in mutual recognition. As Patočka points out, "A genuine sacrifice is

always a sacrifice either in an absolute sense or in the sense of sacrificing that which intensifies our being, rendering it rich, content-full, fulfilled” (Patočka 1996, 336-337). The stronger the pressure of everydayness, the more powerful the experience of sacrifice: “The experience of a sacrifice, however, is now one of the most powerful experiences of our epoch” (Patočka 1996, 337).

3. Thirdly, it means building a community of the “guardians,” of the “shaken but undaunted.” They are those who understand the problematicity of history, and what a historical civilization signifies. This community has the duty to remind the entire society about the authenticity of an existence based on *care of the soul*, a life in freedom. *Charter 77* and the *Velvet Revolution* from 1989 testify for that. We should not forget that Václav Havel was profoundly influenced by Jan Patočka’s philosophy lessons, as well as by his personal example<sup>9</sup> (Patočka paid with his life the courage to have publicly expressed his beliefs and died in 1977 from brain hemorrhage, following the inquiries of the police).

4. In view of “creating the new in history,” the suppression of tension, peace, and the finding of a final solution to all historic problems are no longer all-important. Indeed, the problem of history should not be resolved, for this would be the highest illusion and an imminent danger. Understanding history as a puzzle to be decoded leads to violent solutions.

New beginnings in history are made possible only on the ground of understanding that life in itself could not be the final goal, the highest of all values, which could justify a permanent war by peaceful means. Patočka’s sacrifice means accepting at face a non-finalistic view of history, with no solution and no fixed authoritarian values. Metaphysics, ideological and authoritarian values are but one side of the attempt to solve the problem of history, to heal it through final, ultimate solutions. New beginnings in history would mean for Patočka leaving the space free for a passionate inquiry into the nature of what is most authentically historical being, as *care of the soul*.

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<sup>9</sup> A very important source about the ties between Václav Havel’s and Jan Patočka’s political thought may be found in the article of Edward F. Findlay, “Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique: Political Philosophy in Václav Havel and Jan Patočka,” which seeks to ground ethics and politics without making recourse to metaphysics.



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