An Encounter With:

Francesco Tava. *The Risk of Freedom: Ethics, Phenomenology, and Politics in Jan Patočka*, trans. Jane Ledlie. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. 196 pages.

IAN ANGUS

The Risk of Freedom is a truly impressive work of scholarship. It covers the primary and secondary literature on Jan Patočka in five languages, including the original Czech texts, and is thereby capable of reading his work in a detailed, carefully chronological and comprehensive manner. Such remarkable breadth allows the book to stand as both an in-depth reading of the development of Patočka's interpretation of phenomenology and as a careful commentary on the reception and influence of his work. It makes an impressive contribution to the current renaissance in Patočka studies that, due to his unique perspective on the fundamental issues of phenomenological philosophy compared to Husserl and Heidegger, presses for a re-evaluation of the phenomenology from the ground up. I have no doubt that this text will become a required reference in future discussions of Patočka.

Tava acknowledges that there are many angles—such as phenomenology, the history of philosophy, and political philosophy—from which one may interpret Patočka's work, and initially calls the ethical dimension of his work an "aspect" and a "component" (Tava vii-viii). But he immediately goes on to up the ante by suggesting that ethics is a "useful middle point" between other perspectives. Ethics grounds politics for Patočka; it defends authenticity against external power and is the ground of a responsible subjective spirituality (viii-ix). In this sense, Tava expands the initial "usefulness" of ethics to argue that he can identify ethics as "a new reference point at the core of Patočka's thought" (ix). This wide sense of ethical human being is explored in various dimensions in the subsequent chapters. If Tava's thesis can be sustained, it would suggest that Patočka's phenomenology is distinct in its central focus on ethics from that of the other main phenomenological philosophers—Husserl and Heidegger above all—and also from those who have departed from phenomenology in the name of a recovery of ethics—such as Levinas, Arendt and Jonas, arguably the French existentialists, and perhaps Derrida.

The first chapter introduces Patočka with an emphasis on his negative Platonism and his critique of civilization—which is known primarily through *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History* but which Tava shows was developed in numerous shorter writings, many of which are still only available in Czech. If we associate traditional Platonism with an ontological hierarchy of goods which the philosopher intuits at its highest point, the significant part in Patočka's interpretation is the negative. There is a chasm between the subject as a thinking being and its world and the beings that it experiences. This chasm, or distance, is intensified when the subject aims, not only at viewing the world, but participating in it. In this way, the distance between the experiencing, active subject and the experienced world of beings grounds our status as free beings (4). The negative part in negative Platonism is the focus on the experiencing subject that negates the world in order to uncover its own freedom before finally reaching an affirmation of the good. We can see here the effect of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction as the recovery of subjectivity, but note that it is a more active and ethical subjectivity than in Husserl.

This emphasis on the origin of freedom in subjectivity is followed through in the second chapter in which the critiques of civilization by both Husserl and Marx are argued to be overly and exclusively rationalistic. Thus the specificity of Patočka's critique is to be found in the way in which "irrational and orgiastic elements" are incorporated into a civilizational form (34). While incorporating Heidegger's analysis of *Gestell* as the "enframing of all things according to one's own intrinsic technical programme," Patočka shows that exposure to authentic being requires a sacrifice (43). Such sacrifice must be understood as a "sacrifice for nothing" because, as Tava expresses it, "sacrificing oneself to achieve a specific end would mean, indeed, returning to the scheme of reason which technology tries to impose." (43) I think that Tava has grasped the essential core of Patočka's meaning here, but I would express a doubt as to whether the issue should really be phrased in this way.

For Husserl, the concept of sacrifice referred to the singular absoluteness of ethical goods so that a lower good could not be absorbed by a higher in what we might recognize as a Platonic hierarchy of goods, but must be sacrificed in a choice of one over another (see Husserl, Manuscript E III 9, 33a; in Melle 132). In contrast, Patočka argues that its mythico-religious origin shows that sacrifice is a binding of oneself to something higher and therefore that the apparent loss is simultaneously, and more importantly, a gain. It is, as he says in the essay which Tava quotes, a "sacrifice for everything and for all" and, in that sense, a "sacrifice for nothing"—that is to say, not for an experienced thing within the world but for the world and the subject who experiences the world (Patočka 339). As Patočka says, a sacrifice would not be a sacrifice if it

were a matter of indifference or without worth. But it is hard to see what is really sacrificed here if the “all and nothing” is the genuine description of what is opened up by the transcendental-phenomenological reduction. If one gains all, then one loses nothing. Surely ethics, and sacrifice, is somewhere between these ontological extremes.

I don’t think that it is clear in Patočka’s writings whether his negative Platonism revokes the notion of a hierarchy of goods or whether it re-establishes it through the distance between the subject and its experienced world. It is not clear to me from Tava’s text either. Husserl finally let go of the notion of a hierarchy of goods in order to speak of sacrifice and a life that is, in a certain sense, tragic because it cannot encompass all goods. Patočka, through the notion of a sacrifice for everything or nothing, seems to reinstate a hierarchy of goods, and therefore a rejection of tragedy, insofar as the binding to a higher good seems to overcome, or “absorb” (to use Husserl’s word for this concept) the sacrifice of any other thing or good within the world.

In this sense it seems to me that Patočka’s use of the term “sacrifice” is in the end a misnomer because the All is re-established, but the binding to a higher value may also be a sacrifice of not only the lower but of other equally high, or absolute as Husserl says, values. I say this cautiously in light of Patočka’s own sacrifice—his death in the cause of Charta 77—not to disagree with him about the joy of binding to a higher value, but to say that, even so, sacrifice is not revoked because what is lost would only be “lower” but may well be equal, or absolute, in value. In this sense, our non-transcendental selves would always be incapable of manifesting the whole of the good. At this point the relation between individual and community is posed in a more radical fashion.

It is true enough, as Tava emphasizes, that sacrifice for a “specific end” would return us to a technical means-end conception of reason, but Patočka’s alternative here, which is expressed through the “all or nothing” formulation, seems to leave this concept of reason in place in order to reject the manifestation of authentic being as accessible to reason. Husserl, and perhaps Marx also, aimed at the displacement of this inadequate instrumental conception of reason, in order to express a wider conception of reason that incorporates both ethical self-responsibility and the manifestation of authentic being. While Patočka is oriented in the same direction here, his phrasing places “irrational and orgiastic elements” outside reason and thereby leaves an instrumental conception in place. So, more thought is required about the manner in which irrational and orgiastic elements are included into the ethical interpretation of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction and whether Patočka has a sufficiently tragic concept of sacrifice.

I particularly appreciated Tava's following out of Patočka's ethico-political conception with dated texts of the close relationship of Patočka to Karel Kosík and the phenomenological Marxism of the Prague Spring as well as the wider cultural context of the 1960s.¹ It is not too much to say that Tava's research has reminded us and thoroughly documented the importance of the convergence between phenomenology and Marxism in the 1930s and again in the 1960s. Patočka's conception of the natural world has "nothing to do with the evidence of thought," as in Husserl, but with a threefold movement of self-anchoring, self-loss in labour, and self-finding in self-surrender that allows a deepening of roots and the emergence of a perspective beyond the natural world (Tava 91, 93). This combination of the natural world as both "motions which entrench humans within it, but at the same time also allow them to detach themselves" is the basis for Patočka's appreciation of Marxism as the need for deep roots and meaningful labour as well as his critique that it does not recognize the vertical transcendence (to be grounded in the transcendental-phenomenological reduction) which is the condition for its aim at historical, horizontal transcendence in social revolution (97).

Tava's final chapter deals with Patočka's role in Charta 77 and the politics of dissent as a force not only of opposition but as "capable of taking charge of the foundation of a new form of statehood" (134). This aspect of Patočka's philosophical work and political role is better known. Tava ends his argument for the centrality of ethico-political concern to Patočka's phenomenology with this understanding of political intervention as philosophically understood and justified which thus puts phenomenology within history and the struggle for a genuine human existence. In this part of Patočka's work, the interplay of philosophical reflection and ethico-political action is most evident.

Tava's reading of Patočka's work through the primacy of the ethico-political enables a rigorous, comprehensive, and chronologically meticulous narrative. I would like, however, to mention two reservations about the adequacy of the primacy of the ethico-political as, in Tava's interpretation, "the core of Patočka's thought" (ix).

We may ask whether there is a distinction between the historical occasion and the intrinsic content of Patočka's philosophy. As a philosophy deeply immersed in history, such a distinction could not be the traditional one between a philosophy understood to be fully complete and coherent outside historical location versus a historical intervention which is justified by the philosophy but whose occasion does not add to the philosophy itself. At the end of Tava's book one gets the impression that historical intervention through the practice of dissent becomes the content

¹ The closeness of Patočka to Kosík is not often appreciated. Kohák (1927-62) is a significant exception.

of the philosophy itself. While he does not address this question directly, his argument for the centrality of the ethico-political and the ending of the book with the practice of dissent seems to justify this impression. One would not want philosophy to be dissolved into politics or political science.

One concrete way in which this issue emerges is in the chronological transitions between the relation between phenomenology and Marxism in the 1930s, its resurgence in the 1960s, and the transition to a politics of dissent after 1968. Should we understand these as a historical development in which the inadequate aspects of the former position are shed in later formulations? In this case, dissent in the after-1968 version would be a sort of teleological outcome of Patočka's search for a historically concrete philosophy. Or, should we understand these three historical specificities as really a single position, perhaps developed and expanded in definite historical circumstances, whose specific historical character is determined by the concrete possibilities available? In which case, the historical transformation posited by phenomenological Marxism in the 1930s and 1960s that is abandoned in the concept of dissent might re-emerge in different historical circumstances. Say, for example, our own, in which global capitalism is subjecting all ethico-political formations to the hyperbolic profit motive of an economy dominated by finance capital. Tava is not alone in narrating Patočka's philosophy in chronological form, but does its chronological form imply, or insinuate, that each transition somehow invalidates the previous stage? Is it historical in that sense? It seems to me that an argument for the centrality of the ethico-political to Patočka's phenomenology requires an explicit account of the relation between history and philosophy. Such an account would have to explain the relation between a *historical judgment* about what is politically possible in a given historical juncture and a philosophical account of what would be necessary to address the civilizational impasse as such. I'm not sure whether its absence is an artifact of Tava's text, or argument, or whether it is indeterminate in Patočka as well. Future work on Patočka's philosophy should, it seems to me, address this question.

My second reservation has to do with the concept of asubjective phenomenology for which Patočka is well known. As has been recently argued, "Patočka's project is a struggle between rejecting the transcendental *ego* as the explanatory ground of meaning constitution, and retaining the subject—but not as the last ground from which the world is constituted, rather as a real living being who is open to the world." (Učník *et al.* 2) Patočka's divergence from Husserl on how to understand the transcendental reduction, especially whether or not it is a reduction to an ego, and, if so, how such a transcendental ego is like or unlike a concrete ego, is one of the main philosophical issues that defines his version of phenomenology. The vertical transcendence initiated by the

transcendental-phenomenological reduction entails the risk of freedom and grounds human rights according to Patočka. The connection between the reduction, active subjectivity, and inalienable human rights would be easier to understand in the Husserlian version in which the reduction leads to a transcendental ego that, through an “essential equivocation”, is also the concrete ego (Husserl 184). No doubt the nature of this equivocation between transcendental and concrete ego requires more explication, but some sort of relation between the two would provide a null-point outside history that could ground human rights. How does Patočka’s asubjective phenomenology provide some sort of analogue to this null-point? Or, does it subsume human rights entirely into history, as no doubt Patočka would not want? I didn’t find any answer to this question in Tava’s text, the relation between asubjective phenomenology and history, especially as it pertains to the foundation of human rights, and therefore the central claim in the book that ethics is the centre of Patočka’s philosophy, remains unclear.

These two issues pertain to the complex relationship between phenomenology and history. Tava has explored in erudite detail Patočka’s negotiation of this relationship throughout his philosophical life. However, it leaves unsettled several issues that are not adequately settled in that work. To that extent, I would say that Tava presents Patočka’s work as too resolved, too seamless, too complete. For Tava to sustain his thesis that ethico-political concern is the central focus of Patočka’s phenomenology, he needs to show how these, and other, intra-philosophical issues are somehow derived from, or dependent upon, ethico-political issues. If they are equally important but separate from ethico-political issues, the claim for the centrality of the ethico-political is incorrect. This question is simply not raised by Tava’s text, so the thesis must be regarded as not, or perhaps not yet, proven.

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