

Ľubica Učník
Ivan Chvatík
Anita Williams (eds.)

Asubjective Phenomenology

Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH

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LIBRI NIGRI

41

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Asubjective Phenomenology: Jan Patočka's Project in the Broader Context of his Work

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Lubica Učník
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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie.
Detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet abrufbar über
<http://dnb.ddb.de>

This book is supported by
The Australian Research Council
as part of the Discovery Project entitled
*Judgment, Responsibility, and the Life-World:
The Phenomenological Critique of Formalism.*

Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH
D-99734 Nordhausen 2015

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier
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Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-88309-993-4

In memory of Jan Patočka (1907–1977)

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Acknowledgments

The editors thank the authors of this volume for their contributions, including their commitment to preparing and editing their respective entries. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Australian Research Council (ARC) for the 2010–12 research project, *Judgment, Responsibility and the Life-World* (which has been led by Ľubica Učník). We have also benefited from the support of Murdoch University, Australia; the Jan Patočka Archives at the Center for Theoretical Study at Charles University in Prague, and the Institute of Philosophy at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; and University College Dublin, Ireland. In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to Matt Bower and Kenneth Maly for their work on the translations of Jan Patočka's papers for this book; Darja Zoubková and Hana Matysková from the secretariat of the Center for Theoretical Study in Prague, for organising workshops as part of the ARC grant; and, finally, to Urszula Dawkins for her patience with copyediting the manuscripts.

Jan Patočka's Project of an Asubjective Phenomenology, and the Movement of Human Existence

Ľubica Učník, Anita Williams, Ivan Chvatík

Phenomenology is a mode of philosophising that does not take ready-made theses for its premises but rather keeps all premises at an arm's length. It turns from sclerotic theses to the living well-spring of experience. Its opposite is metaphysics – which constructs philosophy as a special scientific system. Phenomenology examines the experiential content of such theses; in every abstract thought it seeks to uncover what is hidden in it, how we arrive at it, what seen and lived reality underlies it. We are uncovering something that has been here all along, something we had sensed, glimpsed from the corner of our eye but did not fully know, something that 'had not been brought to conception.' *Phenomenon* – that which presents itself; *logos* – meaningful discourse. Only by speaking it out do we know something fully, only what we speak out do we fully see. That is what makes phenomenology so persuasive.¹

Jan Patočka, a Czech philosopher and phenomenologist, travelled to Freiburg in 1933 to study with Edmund Husserl and his research assistant Eugen Fink – Patočka was to be the last student of Husserl. His doctoral thesis (1931)² had been a historical exploration of the concept of evidence, leading to the reappraisal of Husserl's concept.³ His habilitation (1936) focused on another concept of Husserl: the natural world⁴ (based on Avenarius' terminology, from his book, *Der Menschliche Weltbegriff*,⁵ where he formulates the term "*der natürliche Welt-*

¹ Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1998), 3–4, emphasis in original.

² Patočka, "Pojem evidence a jeho význam pro noetiku [The Concept of Evidence and its Significance for Noetics]", *Fenomenologické spisy I: Přirozený svět. Texty z let 1931–1949* (Prague: Oikoymenh, Filosofia, 2008 [1931]), 14–125.

³ See Učník, "Jan Patočka: From the Concept of Evidence to the Natural World and Beyond", eds Učník, Chvatík and Williams, *The Phenomenological Critique of Mathematisation and the Question of Responsibility: Formalisation and the Life-World* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014).

⁴ Patočka, "Přirozený svět jako filosofický problém [The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem]", *Fenomenologické spisy I: Přirozený svět. Texty z let 1931–1949* (Prague: Oikoymenh, Filosofia, 2008 [1936]), 127–260.

⁵ Avenarius, *Der Menschliche Weltbegriff [The Human Concept of the World]* (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1891).

begriff – the natural concept of the world”⁶). Patočka went to Freiburg ostensibly to attend Heidegger’s lecture course, as stipulated by his Humboldt scholarship; Husserl and Heidegger had a lasting influence on his thinking. From this time on, he attempted to rethink both master phenomenologists. Misleadingly, this influence is sometimes (by superficial readers) reduced to the question: ‘Who was the final influence? Is he a ‘Heideggerian’ or does he remain a ‘Husserlian’? As with many such speculations, some claim that Patočka has overcome Husserl’s Cartesianism; others maintain that he has always remained faithful to Husserl.⁷ Not surprisingly, Patočka’s work can be seen as giving some support to both of these interpretations. Here, we will posit that Patočka’s lifelong pursuit of both these thinkers leads him to rethink the phenomenological project by offering a reconceptualisation of *sum*, ‘I am’, as the movement of human existence, later expanded as the three movements of existence; leading him to conceptualise his asubjective phenomenology, which is neither Husserlian nor Heideggerian, but indebted to both while also transgressing the thinking of both. In other words, he remains faithful neither to Husserl nor Heidegger, but to phenomenology.

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. Patočka’s rethinking is marked by unrelenting returns to Husserl and Heidegger and their phenomenological projects. Perhaps it could be said that Patočka attempts to rethink phenomenology as the study of manifestation, which was, he claims, Husserl’s original project. In “What is Phenomenology?”, Patočka proposes to recover Husserl’s maxim to return to ‘things themselves’,⁸ but in a way that overcomes the Cartesian remnants that led Husserl to his transcendental phenomenology.⁹

⁶ See Chvatík, “Patočkova kritika pojmu ‘přirozený svět’ [Patočka’s Critique of the Concept of ‘Natural World’]”, eds Velický et al., *Spor o přirozený svět* (Prague: Filosofia, 2010), 55–68, 56.

⁷ For further discussion, see Michael Gubser’s contribution to this volume.

⁸ Patočka, “Co je fenomenologie? [What is Phenomenology?]”, *Fenomenologické spisy II: Co je existence. Publikované texty z let 1965–1977* (Prague: Oikymen, Filosofia, 2009 [1979]), 497–523, 499: “Předložený pokus však chce především sloužit k obnovení maximy ‘k věcem samým.’”

⁹ For the “concepts of phenomenology” and “Husserl’s maxim ‘going back to the things themselves’, which Heidegger changed slightly to ‘to the things themselves’”, see Herrmann, “Introduction”, trans. Maly, *Hermeneutics and Reflection: Heidegger and*

In his “Afterword” to Husserl’s translation of the *Cartesian Meditations*, Patočka notes that Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is the study of reduced phenomena, which amounts to the study of the world as the pure phenomenon of consciousness.¹⁰ The main problem of Husserl’s approach, as Patočka identifies it, is the idea of phenomenological reduction, derived from Cartesian methodical scepticism.¹¹ In this way, the transcendental field of appearances becomes the structure of the individual *ego*, seemingly turned upon itself, an abstraction, eliminating fundamental layers of experience. The road to the transcendental field as given in the fifth *Meditation* attempts to incorporate, by very complicated procedure, other *egos*, in Husserl’s formulation of intersubjectivity. The Cartesian remnants obscure the original Husserlian project, whereby Husserl does not point to the certainty, as Descartes does, but to the *meaning* of what is revealed to us.¹² And this insight of Patočka’s is important. Husserl shows that we are given a ‘thing’ in different modes of appearing. As is typical of Patočka, he shows the historical trajectory of the constitution of meaning, starting (in this instance) with Plato’s *Letter Seven*, which he claims is the first philosophical reflection on the constitution of meaning. He also claims that Plato influenced the whole tradition by obscuring the field of manifestation – which he in fact discovered – by skipping over it directly to the revealed thing in its presence.¹³ Patočka never became tired of repeating that in the modern analysis

Husserl on the Concept of Phenomenology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 5–9, 5.

¹⁰ Patočka, “Husserlova fenomenologie, fenomenologická filosofie a ‘Kartéziánske meditace’ [Husserl’s Phenomenology, Phenomenological Philosophy and ‘Cartesian Meditations’]”, *Fenomenologické spisy II: Co je existence. Publikované texty z let 1965–1977* (Prague: Oikoymenh, Filosofia, 2009 [1968]), 238–364, 248.

¹¹ See also the translation in this volume, originally published in Czech as Patočka, “Epoché a redukce: Několik poznámek [Epoché and Reduction: Some Observations]”, eds Kouba and Švec, *Fenomenologické spisy II* (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2009 [1975]), 442–452.

¹² Patočka, “Husserlova fenomenologie, fenomenologická filosofie a ‘Kartéziánske meditace’ [Husserl’s Phenomenology, Phenomenological Philosophy and ‘Cartesian Meditations’]”, 250.

¹³ See, for example, Patočka, “Negative Platonism: Reflections Concerning the Rise, the Scope, and the Demise of Metaphysics – and Whether Philosophy Can Survive It”. edited and translated by Kohák. *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989 [circa 1955]), 175–206; Patočka, *Úvod do fenomenologické filosofie [Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy]* (Prague: Oikoymenh, 1993), especially Patočka, *Platónova péče o duši a spravedlivý stát: Přednášky k antické filosofii IV [Plato’s Care for the Soul and the Just State: Lectures on Ancient*

of the constitution of meaning, the phenomenal field – when reduced to the structure of the subject only – simply means that the thingness of things (*res extensa*) is constituted by another thing: *res cogitans*.¹⁴

According to Patočka, in his “*pensée, cogitatio*” Descartes discovers the “phenomenal field” (as Patočka terms it): “what Descartes means here, is nothing other than that where what appears is appearing”.¹⁵ And this field is reduced to the structure of subjectivity, which Descartes immediately abandons, aiming at the certainty of *res extensa*. He discovers *sum*, I am, only to skip over it: in the subsequent tradition, *sum* is simply forgotten. For Patočka, the remainder is simply “a permanent, essential attribute of a thing, which I am”, reduced to something that can persist through time, “as long as I am I”, which is “taken as my determination”, as “the certainty of my being”. Furthermore, it is “what I must suppose as unmistakable and immediately present in all dealings with things, whether the said things are or are not, whether they actually have or do not have this or that determination”.¹⁶ The subject, reduced to ‘thingness’ is the remnant of Descartes’ splitting of the world into two substances. In the last instance, Cartesian doubt gives me certainty that in my *cogitatio*, I have secured the object, which is my own thinking.¹⁷

Philosophy IV], Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky. Svazek 14/4 (Prague: Oikoymenh, Filosofia, 2012). Also see the translation of Patočka’s “Husserl’s Subjectivism and the Call for an A-Subjective Phenomenology” in this volume.

¹⁴ Patočka, “Husserlova fenomenologie, fenomenologická filosofie a ‘Kartéziánske meditace’ [Husserl’s Phenomenology, Phenomenological Philosophy and ‘Cartesian Meditations’]”, 252.

¹⁵ Patočka, “Subjektivismus Husserlovy fenomenologie a možnost ‘asubjektivní’ fenomenologie [The Subjectivism of Husserl’s Phenomenology and the Possibility of an ‘Asubjective’ Phenomenology]”, trans. German, *Fenomenologické spisy II: Co je existence. Publikované texty z let 1965–1977* (Prague: Oikoymenh, Filosofia, 2009 [1970]), 379–396, 383: “Co zde Descartovi tane na mysli, není nic jiného než to, v čem se jeví zjevuje, fenomenální pole.”

¹⁶ Ibid.: “Co tedy zůstane jako stálý, podstatný atribut věci, kterou jsem, může být jen něco, co lze kdykoli, dokud já jsem já, pojmut jako mé určení, a to v jistotě mého bytí. Toto určení ale nebude nic jiného než to, co musím předpokládat jako neklamně a bezprostředně přítomné v každém zabývání se s věcmi, ať už dotyčné věci jsou nebo nejsou, ať už ta a ta určení skutečně mají nebo nemají.”

¹⁷ Patočka, *Úvod do fenomenologické filosofie* [Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy], 56.