

*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 11

# The Political Role of the Philosopher



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### Abstract

This paper borrows two themes rooted in Patočka’s philosophy, viz., negative Platonism and “living in truth” in order to undertake a reflection on the political role of the philosopher. The paper argues that these two themes alone are insufficient to ground an adequate notion of moral and political criticism. Patočka’s notion of free transcending requires us to recognize the non-manifest or transcendental good of thinking, feeling, and acting well that is embedded in our pursuit of manifest moral and political goods. Only in such a transcendental good can the moral and political criticism, of which Patočka’s life is a shining example, be grounded.

It is a great delight to represent the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology at this inaugural meeting of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations. The Center sponsors a variety of activities, all of which are intended to foster, extend, and deepen phenomenology and related forms of continental thought. Chief among these activities is the sponsorship of two book series, the Series in Continental Thought edited by Professor Steven Crowell of Rice University and published by the Ohio University Press, and Contributions to Phenomenology edited by myself and published by Kluwer Academic Publishers. The Center also annually sponsors the Aron Gurwitsch Memorial Lecture delivered in conjunction with the meetings of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy and co-sponsors the Alfred Schutz Memorial Lecture delivered at the annual meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences, as well

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as the Edward Goodwin Ballard Prize awarded annually for an excellent recent book in phenomenology. In addition the Center has sponsored or co-sponsored a large number of conferences on various issues in phenomenology. Many of these have been international in scope, thereby helping to promote a dialogue among phenomenologists around the world; indeed, I suspect many here have participated in one or more of these conferences.

It is also a great honor to participate in a conference here in Prague celebrating the thought and the memory of Jan Patočka on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. Patočka knew all too well the difficulties of sustaining a philosophical life in the face of totalitarian regimes, but he also knew all too well the responsibility of the philosopher to give voice to the demands of the moral within the corruptions of the political. I claim no expertise in Patočka's thought. I shall, however, borrow some basic themes of his thought as starting points for my own reflection, a reflection intended both to challenge Patočka's understanding of the grounds for moral and political criticism and to disclose the manner in which Patočka's thought and life are nevertheless exemplary of the political role of the philosopher as a moral and political critic.

We find already in the Platonic dialogues two models for considering the political role of the philosopher. One, of course, is the famous—or infamous—philosopher-king of the Republic. Plato, as is well known, thinks that ruling the city is analogous to other crafts. As a craft, ruling involves for Plato not only a certain kind of skill in argumentation and decision-making, but also a certain kind of knowledge, the knowledge of the transcendent and ideal form of the Good. Since it is only the philosopher—if anyone—who attains knowledge of the forms, it is the political role of the philosopher to attain this knowledge and to rule the city in conformity therewith. And while it might be an exaggeration to think that this view makes of Plato a totalitarian, it is clear at the very least (1) that rule by the few in the light of the absolute Good imposes on the non-ruling citizens and the non-citizens resident in the city an order not freely chosen by them, (2) that imposing such an order leads the rulers to “noble falsehoods,” i.e., to stories that are noble insofar as they communicate a truth, but literally false and meant to quiet questioning of the imposed order, and (3) that Plato endorses such means of ruling as necessary insofar as the wise in dealing with the non-wise must persuade them by means suitable to the level of knowledge attainable by those who are not philosophers.

The second model provided by the Platonic dialogues, however, is quite different. It is displayed in the character of Socrates. If we accept the standard distinction between Plato's early, Socratic dialogues and his middle dialogues, including the Republic, we are struck by the contrast between the Socrates of those

early dialogues and the Platonized Socrates of the middle dialogues. The Socrates of the early dialogues is the Socrates of the Apology who loudly and proudly proclaims both his ignorance and his moral and political role as a gadfly. There is for Socrates no knowledge of a transcendent form of the Good. His role instead is to reveal the pretensions to knowledge of others, to reveal what is truly an ignorance that does not recognize itself as ignorance.

The early Socratic dialogues famously end in irresolution. We can, perhaps and at best, believe that we have moved closer to an answer by virtue of the fact that we have eliminated inadequate answers. Such a process in its continual elimination of falsehood might asymptotically approach the truth, but there is nothing in the critical role that Socrates fulfills that can guarantee this. This critical approach can just as easily resolve itself into skepticism and nihilism. Largely on the testimony of Plato, we do not believe that Socrates himself was inclined toward this skeptical and nihilistic path. The latter path, according to Plato, was the way of the Sophists, but in Plato's eyes Socrates was no Sophist even though he regularly employed sophistic techniques in his arguments. On Plato's view, Socrates' critical search for common characters and definitions presupposes that there exists some one thing, a form, which is the genuine reality sought. But we have no clear and independent evidence that Socrates himself thought so, and if we deny that he did, we are pushed toward a more skeptical and, perhaps, even a nihilistic position. So, these two models from the Platonic dialogues—the philosopher-king and Socrates—actually provide three alternatives: (1) the transcendent, absolute form of the Good as the basis of moral criticism, (2) the critique of competing conceptions of the good that moves toward a transcendent, but ever receding conception, and (3) skepticism and nihilism.

In our own age we are dubious about absolutist claims to knowledge in general and about absolutist claims to moral knowledge in particular. Argument after argument has been raised against the possibility of knowing absolute goods. Even Husserl, a seeming friend of the notion of apodictic knowledge, cautions us that we can in principle have no incorrigible knowledge regarding transcendent entities. We can, he insists, recognize what is necessary or essential in how things are present to us in our experience, and there is a truth that belongs to our eidetic insights, an evidence that attaches to them such that we can see no present reason to think that we would be wrong. But this notion of apodicticity does not underwrite the belief that our grasp of necessities and essentials is adequate or complete, that it is completely immune to further revision and supplementation.

One conclusion to be drawn from the denial of moral absolutes is that anything goes. This conclusion points toward the sophistic Socrates, to skepticism

and nihilism. Political life on this view becomes an exercise in persuading others to your point of view, not by reason—for there is no truth of the matter—but simply by force. In Plato's dialogues, we think of this force as rhetorical power. This is, according to Plato, what the Sophists, those teachers of political arete, recommended: to use the power of language to shape the beliefs, emotions, desires, and actions of an audience to one's own ends. In the final analysis, however, even rhetorical force when used merely in the service of one's own ends and not in the pursuit of truth is dehumanizing insofar as the other becomes a mere instrument to one's own ends. Moreover, the power of persuasion need not be rhetorical; persuasive power can reside in the rifle. When it does, when nihilism is combined with police power or military power, the result is just as dehumanizing as moral absolutism—a dehumanization to which Patočka bore witness with his life.

The Platonized Socrates, but not Plato, therefore charts our course. We must sail in a direction that avoids both the Scylla of moral absolutism and the Charybdis of moral skepticism and nihilism. It is just this course that Patočka sets with his doctrine of “negative Platonism.”<sup>1</sup> Negative Platonism is Platonism insofar as it incorporates a transcending moment, a movement beyond the natural goods we accept in our everyday living toward the transcendent ground of those goods. Negative Platonism is negative, however, insofar as it denies that we can ever actually attain that ground. Patočka's ethics of transcendence rejects any version of a closed system of goods. The Socratic moment, i.e., the critical, questioning moment, not only is never, but can never be overcome. Since nihilism is an unacceptable alternative, we are left with the free pursuit of a truth that surpasses our understanding of natural goods.

Whereas Plato is committed to the transcendent Good itself, Patočka is committed to a free transcending, i.e., to freedom itself. Patočka's free transcending is an absolute that rejects transcendent absolutes, that rejects and renders impossible any moral absolutism. We must, in other words, live as transcending beings, always remaining critically vigilant and not allowing ourselves to be seduced by any particular conception of the good that might come to control and enslave our lives.

Negative Platonism's emphasis on free transcending is intimately related to

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<sup>1</sup> For the most succinct account of “Negative Platonism,” cf. Jan Patočka, “Negative Platonism: Reflections Concerning the Rise, the Scope, and the Demise of Metaphysics — and Whether Philosophy Can Survive It,” in Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings, ed. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

the idea of “living in truth.”<sup>2</sup> One must, in other words, reject even a benign nihilism of the sort advanced by some contemporary American neo-pragmatists. The aim is not merely to keep the conversation about the nature of the good alive. The goal is to live at once in freedom and in truth. The Socratic critical moment, I have suggested, is retained; free transcending always aims at truth, even if it cannot attain an absolute truth. This is why the life of free transcending is not simply a life led in vain and why Patočka’s own example is for us a noble example.

Nevertheless, there is, I believe, a gap in Patočka’s thought. The absence of a transcendent good means that our free transcending has a historical character, one in which we, at least if we exercise our freedom “truthfully,” advance in our understanding of moral behaviors, practices, and institutions. But what exactly is it to exercise our freedom truthfully? I shall in what follows propose a Husserlian—but not necessarily Husserl’s—response to this question. My claim is that we must focus neither on the transcendent good nor merely on the free transcending of particular and natural goods, but on transcendental subjectivity, the agent of the truthful and free disclosure of both our moral being and a moral world. This, I believe, is the conclusion toward which Patočka’s living in the truth of negative Platonism points us.

To live in the truth is to live not only in transcending given conceptions of the good by more precise determination of its sense. It is also to live in evidence, in an experience evidentially (but not adequately or absolutely) fulfilling this conception. Intentional life is teleologically ordered toward this end of evident experience. Insofar as our experiences are not purely cognitive, however, we must understand this notion of evidential fulfillment in the broadest possible sense. Our original encounter of things is with them as cultural objects having a certain significance for us, as affecting us in certain ways, as having certain functions, as engendering certain desires or aversions in us, and so forth. In this context, evidential fulfillment involves presentational, emotional, and actional dimensions. In all these dimensions our intendings of things and our ways of being engaged with them are legitimated or not, fulfilled or disappointed.

In the moral sphere we are faced with a multiplicity of choiceworthy goods, not all of which can be realized in a single life. It is not merely the case that there are too many such goods. Rather, we come to the choice among goods with our own capacities, talents, and interests such that we value only some among these many goods. The agent whose moral life is to be rationally and emotionally well ordered

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<sup>2</sup> The expression, as far as I know, was coined by Patočka’s student Vaclav Havel and was central to the discussions surrounding the drafting of Charter 77. The idea that Havel’s expression emphasizes, however, is firmly rooted in Patočka’s thought.

and who is to act well will choose from the multiplicity of goods available in her cultural and historical circumstances a small number of goods that are highly valued in relation to her interest in developing her natural and acquired capacities and talents such that she can be said to realize a flourishing life. We choose, in other words, what Husserl called “vocational goods” that give order, structure, and moral significance to the whole of our lives. We might choose, for example, as many of us in this room have, to be a spouse and parent, a philosopher, and a teacher. We are also all citizens of some state, and we might choose actively to exercise our citizenship.

Among the vocational goods that we value, certain kinds of conflicts can and will at times arise. The choice among conflicting goods can be very difficult, and it motivates us to consider carefully which of these goods must be subordinated to another. This kind of rational criticism does not entail that we can determine a fixed, a priori hierarchy of goods to which we can appeal for guidance when subordinating goods to one another. It does, however, mean that rational criticism might reveal some of those goods that have ordered our lives to be less important than previously thought, perhaps even to be no longer important at all. Such continual rational criticism constantly takes us beyond any particular set of goods to which we have directed our attention. Rational criticism is a constantly self-transcending activity, even in those cases where it leads us to confirm our choice of vocational goods, for they have been tested against other alternatives, against other possibilities. This movement beyond the actual into the possible is, I think, the kind of movement Patočka has in mind when he speaks of transcending. We raise for ourselves the possibility that the de facto hierarchy of goods organized by our vocational choices should change in response to revised choices about which goods count more for us in the circumstances of our lives. In questioning and criticizing those goods that impart moral order and direction to our lives, we seek fulfillment of our moral intentions with their presentational, affective, motivational, and actional dimensions. In this way we become responsible thinkers and agents.

What is to be noted in this far too abbreviated account of the fundamental moral choices that we call vocational is that there can and will be material differences among the vocational goods toward which different individuals order their lives. In these varied choices regarding vocational goods, however, we nevertheless find a certain kind of identity. Each person in choosing seeks an evidential insight into the truthfulness of her choices and the rightness of her actions. There is, in other words, a good identical to each of the “manifest” material goods directly pursued in our everyday choices, i.e., there is a “non-manifest” good embedded in

the pursuit of each manifest material good. It is the good of thinking well and truly (both theoretically and practically), of feeling well (i.e., having the right emotions and attitudes), and of acting well. It is not a transcendent, absolute good, but what I shall call a “transcendental good.” To realize this transcendental good is to realize the fullness of free, insightful agency in which reason, feeling, the emotions, desires, and actions are ordered together not only in the pursuit of manifest vocational goods, but in pursuit also and at the same time of this non-manifest ideal of free, insightful agency.

Husserl speaks of this transcendental good as “authenticity” (*Eigentlichkeit*). This is not authenticity in the fully voluntaristic sense that we find, say, in Nietzsche or the early Sartre. It is not merely a matter of choosing or willing well. It is also a matter of thinking well, of being able to give reasons for our identification of certain goods, and of evidently experiencing the good. This is the moral urgency central to Husserl’s thought: to decide for oneself. But to decide for oneself is both to decide about what is truly good in the light of evidence (rather than passively accept what others claim to be the good), and to decide what to do among the alternatives so as best to attain that good.

Important to note about this transcendental good of authenticity is that it is, in one sense, formal and without substantive content itself. Any experience—whatever its content—tends to fulfillment; any willing—whatever its content—tends to fulfillment in free, insightful agency. But it is also important to note that this quasi-formal authenticity informs our active pursuit of manifest goods. It is realized only in the evidential pursuit of other substantive, material goods, i.e., transcendent goods, in our everyday experience. It is precisely in pursuing transcendent goods authentically that the transcendental good is realized.

In the choice of vocational goods that endow our world and our lives with moral significance, we are pre-theoretically and pre-reflectively aware of transcendental subjectivity itself.<sup>3</sup> In our choosing vocational goods, transcendental subjectivity “shines” through our everyday encounter with things. We glimpse ourselves not merely as subjects in the world affected by worldly things, but as subjects for the world, disclosing the significance, including the moral significance,

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<sup>3</sup> I am here indebted to both David Carr and Steven Crowell who have made clearer to me the manner in which our affective and moral lives disclose transcendental subjectivity as operative in the world. Cf. Carr’s discussion of Sartre’s notions of *nausée* and *angoisse* and Heidegger’s notion of *Angst* in *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127–31; cf. also Crowell’s discussion of Heidegger’s notions of *Angst* and *Gewissen* in “Subjectivity: Locating the First-Person in Being and Time,” *Inquiry* 44 (2001): 433–54. Both discussions point to a pre-reflective, pre-theoretical, pre-philosophical disclosure of a first-person, constituting subjectivity of the sort I am attributing to the vocational choices that give moral significance to the things of the world.

of things and fashioning a moral world-order in the judgments we frame, the choices we make, and the actions we undertake.

Because transcendental subjectivity is necessarily transcendental intersubjectivity, and given our transcendental interest in evidential experience, our pursuit of the transcendental good of authenticity is a pursuit of that good both for ourselves and for others. To pursue this good in my own life, in other words, requires that I pursue it with others who are similarly authentic in their own experiential life, for only then do the truths and goods I disclose transcend my own personal life and attain objective validity. Hence, my realization of this transcendental good in my own life is bound up with its realization in the life of other free, rational agents.

In encountering other persons, I recognize an irreducible source of free cognitions, emotions, valuations, and actions. I recognize one who is in her own life pursuing vocational goods and one who commands respect precisely insofar as she is autonomous and has the capacity for pursuing the transcendental good of free and insightful agency. The possession of this capacity is recognized as both a necessary condition for and conducive to the authentic life. The mere possession of the capacity, in other words, is itself valuable, whether or not it is well exercised, and any being possessing this capacity has a certain dignity that commands our respect and obligates us to foster their capacities for an autonomous life.

To put the matter another way, the value of the realized authentic life is so estimable and central to our shared experience that it would be incoherent not to respect the mere possession of the capacities without which that life is impossible. The possession by someone of the capacities for insightful judging and insightful valuing and willing and for the actional performances that fulfill these experiences provides a ground for the respect in which we recognize and value the possession of the capacities and do not merely wish but will and act to bring about their realization. In this recognition, I experience the obligation both not to interfere with another's pursuit of authenticity (and the rational and practical autonomy belonging thereto) and to do what I can to promote the transcendental capacity to realize these non-manifest goods.

At this point, we can begin to see the political significance of this notion of a transcendental good. The authentic life has both necessary components and necessary conditions. A necessary component, i.e., a moment, of this life is something apart from which the life of insightful thinking for oneself is impossible—for example, the freedoms of thought, speech, action, and association proper to the development of authenticity in an intersubjective context. A necessary condition of this life is something that is not itself a moment of such a life, but is required for the realization of the capacity for it. Some of these conditions are pri-

marily bodily, e.g., the health, sustenance, and shelter necessary for maintaining life itself, as well as bodily security, i.e., freedom from assault. Other conditions are not primarily bodily, e.g., education with its concern for both theoretical and practical truth—the education, in other words, of both the mind and the emotions. The components and conditions are both goods as such and valuable in themselves, but they are also good precisely because apart from them authentic living in the pursuit of vocational goods is impossible. These moments and conditions of authenticity are recognized as goods in relation to what a good life is, in relation to authentic rational agency, and as inseparable from it.

I experience these goods as imposing an obligation that might very well conflict with and override other manifest goods (or apparent goods) that belong to my individual life and pursuits. The obligatory character of the experience of these goods arises from the fact that without them the realization of the transcendental good, i.e., the authentic realization of manifest goods, is impossible. These goods obligate us insofar as we must recognize the necessary desirability of those component goods without which one would not be a free, insightful agent at all and of those conditional goods without which one could be a free, insightful agent only with great, perhaps insuperable, difficulty. Since they are goods as such, and not merely for me, and since they are necessary for any free, insightful agent, they impose an obligation upon me to seek their realization as such, i.e., not only for myself but also for all other rational agents.<sup>4</sup>

It is in this light that we must understand the political role of the philosopher. The political task of the philosopher is to help all understand the interconnection of the everyday pursuit of goods and the pursuit of the transcendental good

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<sup>4</sup> I have discussed these issues concerning moral intentionality and the transcendental good at greater length in the following articles: “Moral Objectivity: Husserl’s Sentiments of the Understanding,” *Husserl Studies* 12 (1995): 165–183; “The ‘Spiritual’ World: the Personal, the Social, and the Communal,” in *Issues in Ideas II*, ed. T. Nenon and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 237–254; “Agency, Agents, and (Sometimes) Patients,” in *The Truthful and the Good: Essays in Honor of Robert Sokolowski*, ed. J. Drummond and J. Hart (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 145–157; “Time, History, and Tradition,” in *The Many Faces of Time*, ed. J. Brough and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 127–47; “Ethics,” in *The Reach of Reflection: Issues for Phenomenology’s Second Century*, ed. Steven Crowell, Lester Embree, and Samuel J. Julian, a refereed work published electronically by the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology (3 vols., <<http://www.electronpress.com>>, 2001), 1: 118–41; “Moral Encounters,” *Recherches husserliennes* 16 (2001): 39–60; “Introduction: The Phenomenological Tradition and Moral Philosophy,” in *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy*, ed. John J. Drummond and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 1–13; “Aristotelianism and Phenomenology,” *ibid.*, 15–45; “Respect as a Moral Emotion: A Phenomenological Approach,” *Studies in Practical Philosophy: A Journal of Ethical and Political Philosophy*, forthcoming; and “Complicating the Emotions” (in Spanish translation), *Arete*, forthcoming.

of insightful, rational agency itself along with its moments and necessary conditions. This philosophical function of identifying the transcendental good and its necessary components and conditions is an inseparable part of the political and jurisprudential determination of constitutional rights, most notably self-governance and those goods which conduce to it. It is here that the issue of civil rights, those guarantees of participation in the self-governance of the community, arises. It is here too that the issue of social rights—to a minimum standard of living, to education, and so forth—arises. The transcendental good, understood in the political context as the self-governance of and by a (politically) free people, requires both a set of associated political freedoms and some set of institutions that provides at least to some degree the necessary material and spiritual requirements for self-governance.

This philosophical task is framed in positive terms, but there is also—and perhaps more importantly—a negative or critical moment belonging to it. Since the philosopher is always already confronted with particular political institutions, both those of his own state and those of other states, she is called upon to criticize particular states, institutions, or practices whenever and wherever they are inadequate, i.e., when they block the realization of the transcendental good of free, insightful agency or the political good of self-governance. When a state, its institutions, and its practices embody patterns of domination that deny rational free agency, its moments, or its necessary conditions to any member of the political community, philosophers are called to criticism in the light of what they know about the transcendental good of authenticity and its requirements.<sup>5</sup>

It is in transcendental subjectivity, then, that we find the condition for the possibility and sense of transcending in the manner that Patočka speaks of it and that we find the ground for moral and political critique. Here, in transcendental subjectivity, is the ground of those universal goods we seek—despite all the differences in the manifest, vocational goods we undertake to achieve—and the ground in reference to which we identify those rights we call upon governments—despite all the differences in political institutions and practices—to establish, preserve, and protect. We commemorate the lives of those like Jan Patočka who live such authentic lives and engage in such critique. They disclose moral truths, live in the light of the evidence of such truths, and call the rest of us to their example.

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<sup>5</sup> I have discussed the political dimensions of my view of the transcendental good of authenticity in “Political Community,” in *Phenomenology of the Political*, ed. K. Thompson and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 29–53; and “Forms of Social Unity: Partnership, Membership, and Citizenship,” *Husserl Studies* 18 (2002): 123–40.