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Patočka and Rorty The problem of freedom

Abstract: Patočka's and Rorty's philosophy offers a foundation for the reconstruction of liberalism and a possibility of fulfilling individual freedom. Patočka intends to assess the value of transcendence and its relevance to life. He attempts to save metaphysics, for it does not need to become dogmatic. Contemporary readers may find Patočka's reflections on freedom valuable. Patočka invites people to connect their spirituality with skepticism and modesty, and according to Socratic knowing of unknowing, with humility, which makes them non-dogmatically open to transcendence. In his reflections on the human being, Rorty refers to moral responsibility and appeals for self-awareness and taking responsibility for one's actions, because it is the human being who has the necessary abilities to shape their own authentic way of life. Rorty's concept of freedom as a contingent phenomenon is based on the concept of history of Western philosophy and is closely linked with the problem of metaphysics and truth. The reflections of both philosophers are timeless, but any timeless ideal of human freedom is determined by the context in which it is considered.

Keywords: Patočka, Rorty, freedom, metaphysics, contingency, post-metaphysical culture

1. Introduction

Jan Patočka belongs to the same generation of scholars as Hannah Arendt. Unlike Arendt, he did not flee to the West from German fascism, but remained in Czechoslovakia both during the reign of the Nazis as well as during the *Soviet regime*. As commonly known, he belonged to the group of dissidents who issued a manifesto called

Charter 77, which called for the respect of fundamental human rights, following the adoption of the Helsinki Convention by the Government of Czechoslovakia.¹ In the context of what Patočka experienced and lived through, it is not surprising that one of the themes that have become a permanent part of his philosophical reflections is the problem of freedom, an area where he felt a strong social and especially political deficit.

Patočka's thoughts about freedom even today retain their urgency and importance. He passionately defended human rights and human dignity and claimed that "in order for the progress and leadership abilities to become possible, they [people; K.M.] must be convinced of the unconditional validity of principles in this respect, 'sacred' to all and always capable of binding and defining the purpose."² Patočka, however, was well aware of the relativity of these values, since (even before the beginning of postmodern discourse in America) he wrote about the death of metaphysics, and his criticism in this respect was based mainly on the arguments offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger, who were (not only for him) a kind of evidence of the end of the metaphysical period in philosophy. Unlike Richard Rorty (who in this sense becomes his counterpart in the comparison of two different views on the problem of freedom), Patočka refuses to understand freedom as something contingent, or as a tentative possibility of an evolutionary historical movement. Despite his rejection of traditional metaphysics, we can find in his works an implicit critique of the notion of freedom as a random option, as advanced by Rorty.

2. Rorty's concept of freedom as a contingent phenomenon

Rorty's primary intention is to explore the possibility of freedom, but he also focuses on its individual manifestations and calls for the

¹ See I. CHVATÍK: "Kolem Patočkovy politiky duchovního člověka." *Filozofia* 6 (2015), pp. 458–464.

² J. PATOČKA: "Čím je a čím není Charta 77. Proč je právo na její straně a žádné pomluvy ani násilná opatření jí neotřesou." In: *Charta 77. Mezinárodní vědecká konference u příležitosti 30. výročí vzniku Charty 77. Praha 21. až 23. března 2007. Dokumenty k Chartě 77.*

acceptance of the fact that human beings are no longer shackled by some higher principles, or a kind of natural (divine) order. In this perspective, freedom becomes the choice of the desired lifestyle. Rorty's concept of freedom as a contingent phenomenon is mainly based on the reflection on the history of Western philosophy. He refers to the understanding of truth as something we can objectively examine; he writes about the history of Faith, with the prevailing belief that everything around us is constructed according to a certain divine or rational plan, which can be grasped in a philosophical reflection. According to Rorty, if this approach is taken, it is clearly a restriction on human freedom. If we should be guided accordingly, the sole purpose in our lives would be a search for truth and life in accordance with it. Once we have found the truth, we would have no choice but to follow it. Some relief comes for us from the knowledge that we create truth rather than search for it, as Rorty repeatedly emphasises.

According to Rorty, the truth is only our intention, it is a matter of historically incurred faith (belief) of a certain community. It is necessary to overcome the misconception that philosophy is in a position of uncovering the truth; we should be aware of the fact that this issue involves a considerable amount of evaluation and interpretation, or even that it might be preferable to leave it to *poetry*. In this way, we can become free in the process of creating ourselves and come closer to the ideal of Rorty's faithful poet, who endows his or her life with originality without copying any predetermined (or old) examples.

Despite the fact that Rorty's position — the way he understands freedom as a contingent (random) ability to recognise the potentiality — is very simple and in a sense may seem attractive, it certainly does represent a complicated problem.

On the one hand, freedom as construed by Rorty has a releasing, internally liberating dimension; on the other hand, however, it may lead to the sense of futility and emptiness. Nietzsche and later Heidegger, the harbingers of radical historicity of existence, argued that the need of free choice from several options may lead to despair, to the loss of its actual or potential meaning. If we proceed to destroy all previous idols at the cost of obtaining freedom and understanding the human as a being that in the universe depends only on him or herself, our situation may be marked by nihilism. I think that Rorty avoids this kind of pessimism and focuses on the unique opportunity to create a free human being with his or her original way of life.

For Rorty, however, other issues arise which are linked to his concept of freedom as something contingent, and which pose problems

in accepting those ideas. He argues that a contingent community may aim at the “healing effects in relation to our deep metaphysical needs,”³ a tendency to look for absolute truth. Rorty’s ideas do not necessarily imply a secularised liberal society, which might also be plausible. Nietzsche describes such a society (culture) as the future world culture of the last man — a creature that is indifferent to any transcendence. I think that Rorty is unable to accept the perpetual metaphysical need of the human being to seek meaning beyond themselves, their will and desire for transcendence, a desire for truth which is situated outside. I believe that any attempt to eliminate or ignore this aspect of the human being cannot be simple or painless, if at all possible.

Taking into consideration the impact of external social relations, we will now discuss the perception of the principles of liberalism, especially human freedom, in the thought of Jan Patočka, a Czech philosopher little known to Americans.

For philosophers working and growing in the world of American democracy, thinking about freedom along the lines that can be found in the thought of Patočka is quite incomprehensible. It is regrettable that apart from the University of Chicago, which issued Kohak’s translations of some of his essays, there is no other work through which to explore Patočka’s philosophical thinking in the United States, not to mention the general lack of translations of his works. His ideas of freedom, however, were spread through literary activities of Vaclav Havel, who called for a life in truth, inspired by Patočka’s philosophical position of caring for the soul, but also encouraged the attitude of humility, which is the result of recognition and acceptance of the possibility that in the universe there is something greater than man himself. Of course, Patočka’s influence on Havel is not the most important thing to be seen in his philosophy, but first and foremost there are his reflections on freedom, a problem which has retained a certain degree of urgency and hence has become part of today’s discussion.

The main difference between the perception of liberty in Patočka and Rorty lies in Patočka’s rejection of *understanding of freedom as something contingent* (as an optional possibility of evolutionary historical movement). When defining Rorty’s understanding of freedom, it is important to note the definition of a liberal, expressed in a condensed form by Egon Gál: “A liberal in his vocabulary is not a devotee of ideology that considers the personal autonomy and the

³ R. RORTY: *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge 1989, p. 46.

individual freedom as the highest values, but it is a man who realises that ‘*the supreme evil that we can commit is to be cruel to other people.*’⁴

Rorty’s understanding of freedom is not least influenced by his positive attitude and the proclamation of a *post-metaphysical culture*. He sees it mainly as “poetry culture in which there is no space for imperative that is common to religion and metaphysics. [Rorty; K.M.] primarily emphasises the search for ahistorical, transcultural forms for thinking, independent of place and time.”⁵ It should be a culture in which questions of human existence are mainly related to the formation of human lives, to the world around and not to *problems of being* that are subordinated to explaining the very nature of the world, more or less based on the concept of God, who is not only in the position of a kind of guarantor, but also in the position that facilitates knowledge of the reality in the way it is. Hence, freedom in Rorty’s understanding is an expression of acceptance that human beings are no longer tied up by some higher (divine) order, which is why they can also be free to choose and decide in selecting the best way of life. However, this notion of truth restricts the freedom of man — especially if it is seen as something (historically) contingent.

Neither pragmatists nor their followers — new pragmatists — trust claims that there is a real, absolute state of affairs. And perhaps therein lies also their aversion to the notion of metaphysics, because this term, in a sense, a priori requires *replacement of the phenomenon by the reality*.

Pragmatists solve the problem of the terms phenomenon and fact by a simple replacement with *useful* and *less useful*, when applied to the creation of a world oriented towards a better life. Pragmatists often offer such vague, perhaps even unhelpful answers; they step out of excessive ties with the past; at the same time, however, they expect and believe in a better future (which can inspire us again and surprise). They do not care much about the future as such, but they do care about the way how to achieve it.

Unlike Rorty, Patočka writes about *thrown freedom*, indicating that “all the possibilities of freedom stem from what puts us in human history, they are determined by what has happened. The past is thus an urgent appeal to our freedom to revive to its own

⁴ E. GÁL: “Richard Rorty: medzi nádejou a skepsou.” *Kritika a kontext* 34 (2007), p. 10.

⁵ R. RORTY: “Toward a Postmetaphysical Culture.” In: R. RORTY: *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*. Interviews with Richard Rorty. Stanford 2006, p. 46.

question.”⁶ Patočka stresses the need to rely on history, which is significant to the meaning or meaningfulness of freedom; freedom, in turn, based on past mistakes, can determine people’s goals, models, and options.

3. Patočka and the question of freedom

According to Patočka, “history attempts to find the past to carry out its evaluation, to clarify our own relationship to the wave that carries us in the light of truth, the truth that we are, that we enact. The truth of a historian’s history depends on whether he has understood or misunderstood human freedom. Freedom, however, could be understood by grasping it in that historian’s situation, in staying true to ourselves, steadfast, stronger than the world; by taking this decision, one overcomes the world without having to leave it.”⁷ In this understanding of freedom, the most important for Patočka is the human being, because his question “*what is history* clearly leads to the question of *what man is*.”⁸ We cannot talk about humanity without knowing who we are. The essence of the human being is “that they are aware of their humanity.”⁹ What does it mean to be aware of one’s humanity?

Patočka offers a clear answer to this question: it is awareness that we are immersed in the world. It is a world in which people like to move, the world in which we are never alone, where our *being in the world* means *being with others*.

In this understanding of philosophy as an expression of the freedom of movement, the highest form of human ways of life, his philosophy is closely tied to the human being, and “a human being, at least one who has turned to philosophy, ... should not fulfill the orders of god or gods of whatever provenance; actually, they have nothing else to do but grab their own freedom.” Therefore, this philosophy implies “a movement of freedom and also a courage to accept

⁶ J. PATOČKA: “Několik poznámek k pojmu dějin a dějepisu.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši I*. Praha 1996, p. 43.

⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

⁸ V. LEŠKO: *Filozofia dejín filozofie*. Prešov 2004, p. 265.

⁹ J. PATOČKA: “Několik poznámek k pojmu dějin a dějepisu,” pp. 41—43.

freedom that one can meaningfully realise, but which one can also overtly or covertly betray.”¹⁰

Socrates and his philosophy has a special place in Patočka’s philosophy, especially in connection with the *care for the soul*. Common to Rorty and Patočka is an inspiration by Socrates as an extraordinary philosophical personality. “It seems that the set project of philosophy as the *creation of living people — lively minds* — would remain unfulfilled if there had not been such a philosophical personality as Socrates”; therefore, “Socrates’ reception is not unrelated to the historical and philosophical problem of Patočka’s work, but it is precisely its innermost moment without which we would not be able to identify Patočka’s critical spirit of philosophising — *the struggle for the human being, their life and sense of human movement in historical and individual dimension — about a human historicity*.”¹¹

Patočka believes that it is not possible to philosophise without Socrates. In addition to his superlative ability to enter into dialogues and bring his interlocutor to formulate his or her own opinions and conclusions on the discussed problem (thus offering opportunities to become free from prejudices), he appreciates his courage and critical attitude, which he was able to adopt towards everything, especially towards society.

Based on the philosophical heritage of Socrates, Patočka arrived at a formulation of the most fundamental issues in connection with the *care for the soul*. “The soul decides about itself and has the strength to such an aim, which is only its own — knowing the truth, the power of discernment of good and evil.”¹² This is the point where we can find a common element with Rorty’s philosophy — arriving at the recognition of cruelty as a universal evil. Patočka emphasises the Socratic *care for the soul* as an effort to overcome *false individualism*, with emphasis on resolving the dilemma of to *have* or to *be*.¹³

Rorty also refers to Socrates, realising that “when we say that Socrates loved the truth, sometimes we just want to say that he was willing to stand by his core beliefs in spite of the fact that his contemporaries did not understand him.”¹⁴ Between Rorty’s two possible and acceptable perceptions of truth — *truth as a love for wisdom* and truth as a *virtue* — there is some tension; therefore, he turns

¹⁰ See P. THOLT: *J. Patočka a vznik matematickej prírodovedy*. Košice 2003.

¹¹ V. LEŠKO: *Filozofia dejín filozofie*, p. 273.

¹² J. PATOČKA: “Kapitoly ze současné filosofie.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši I.*, p. 109.

¹³ See V. LEŠKO: *Filozofia dejín filozofie*, p. 277.

¹⁴ R. RORTY: *Filozofické orchidey*. Trans. L. HÁBOVÁ. Bratislava 2006, p. 147.

to defining the concept of wisdom. He explains it as the presence of balance between two elements: an effort to listen to others, perhaps on the assumption that most of our ideas are more advanced than those of others, and an attempt to hold on to our own arguments until we become truly convinced that they have been overcome, even if this means that they were false.

According to Heidegger, the principal source of uncertainty (often found in the philosophy of pragmatism) lies in the American way of leaving metaphysics behind. Heidegger points out that the American perspective (from its starting position — pragmatism) is not able to draw on the accumulated metaphysical bounty offered by the European philosophy. Finally, Heidegger (as usual) aims for *fullness of being present*, for something “that does not escape into the infinite future.”¹⁵ Dewey points out that the need to prioritise stability over change has been present in philosophy from its very beginnings. In this respect, metaphysics is “a substitute for the habit as a source and a guarantee of higher moral and social values — that is the leading topic of European classical philosophy.”¹⁶

4. Patočka, Rorty, and metaphysics

According to Rorty, philosophy no longer needs to rely on metaphysics, which (in the tradition of Western philosophy) has passed its period of usefulness. Rorty, in addition to introducing post-metaphysical culture, puts emphasis on the *deconstruction of metaphysics* (influenced by the hermeneutical ideas of Gadamer), because it is necessary to overcome the arguments concerning the only possible and the only existing objective truth. *Deconstruction* envisaged by Rorty is not applied only in the field of metaphysics, but in all spheres — it is a general deconstruction to which everything is subjected. It marks the end of logocentrism, which frequently operates with concepts that have been attributed to objectivity, concerning the world that surrounds us; it is often in logocentrism that the term

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁶ J. DEWEY: *Reconstruction in Philosophy. The Middle Works of John Dewey*. Carbondale III. Southern Illinois 1982, p. 89.

“the only objective truth” represents the highest Being, reality, but often without any meaning.

Neither logocentrism, reflected, prioritised and raised by philosophy at some point in history, nor endless confirmation of claims through experimentation and creation of paradigms (which is a privilege of science), nor the mythological existence of God and divine interference in people’s lives is the right path, pointing to the future that awaits us, which we are now possibly living. The basis of the viable society is the *existence of dialogue, the distance from dogma* and scientific ways of explaining the world.

In Rorty’s opinion, there is no particular need to recognise the existence of something higher outside ourselves in philosophy or in other areas of human life; it is important to draw the attention of philosophers, politicians, theologians, as well as scientists and poets to the *intersubjective world* of man and his needs. It is not possible to announce that there is “the only fundamental and normative firm foundation on which our knowledge and ethics could rely.”¹⁷ A person entering a period of freedom can independently consider and decide about the modalities of achieving the desired objectives and does not have to, or maybe does not want to, rely on mysticism and false hopes related to the question of happiness that he or she attempts to achieve and often fights for. J. Peregrin can therefore rightly conclude that wanting “to know the world as it really is, regardless of these values ... is in fact meaningless.”¹⁸

Freedom in Rorty’s understanding of a contingent ability to recognise an opportunity represents a complicated problem. Also it represents a challenge to the materialistic world, a world that we perceive as materialistic. Rorty writes as follows: “genuine novelty can, after all, occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces ... for all we know, or should care, Aristotle’s metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul’s metaphorical use of *agape*, and Newton’s metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the results of some odd episodes in infancy — some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata.”¹⁹

¹⁷ R. RORTY and G. VATTIMO: *Budoucnost náboženství*. Ed. S. ZABALA. Trans. L. JOHNOVA. Praha 2007, p. 17.

¹⁸ J. PEREGRIN: “Současná filosofie USA: analytická filosofie pod rentgenem pragmatizmu.” In: H. PUTNAM and R. RORTY: *Co po metafyzice?* Trans. J. PEREGRIN. Bratislava 1997, p. 11.

¹⁹ See R. RORTY: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 17.

Patočka's attitude toward metaphysics is in a sense close to Rorty's views when he points out that "the role of science is to capture and describe phenomena (facts), and this is convincing; but it is not convincing or credible when it reflects on what is *above* nature, which is a *meta-physis*, because it is no longer the subject of natural experience."²⁰ We cannot attribute only negativistic attitude to Patočka's metaphysics. His aim is to *preserve and overcome* metaphysics in a deeper sense, and therefore, to understand "how it is possible that a human spirit ever again returns to metaphysics despite its emptiness and infertility, emphasised hundred times, despite its indefensibility, even nonsense in terms of objective rationality, ever and again returning to these areas from which it is impossible to take even one step further — by measuring instruments and methods which are used in positive knowledge."²¹

Patočka draws attention to the confusion of modern man, who no longer lives only in the natural world, but is influenced by his own efforts to achieve perfection, to dominate, to control the nature. The result is that modern man is losing himself. "The modern human does not have a uniform view of the world; they live in a dual world, in their natural surroundings and in the world formed by a modern natural science, built on the principle of mathematical laws of nature. Disunity, which thus penetrates our entire life, is our own source of spiritual crisis that we strive to overcome."²² Modern humans find themselves in an unknown situation and rely on science, on its possibilities of detecting the unknown, hoping to get to know themselves and learn the way they should live.

Patočka, unlike Rorty, points to the futility of our efforts to reject metaphysics, because rejecting it is not possible. When we start with moral evaluation, it is not possible to bypass metaphysics. Humans in their inseparable relation to their own existence, in relation to their surroundings, to the world and to others, are not able to live without evaluative or *moral judgements*, and so they cannot take any neutral position and remain indifferent. According to Patočka, *we are not in this world as indifferent bystanders and witnesses, but being in the world is what we want in the truest sense of the term.* Being is for us something that is "the subject of positive or negative interest," but Patočka goes further and states that "in fact there is

²⁰ P. LOM: "East meets West — Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty on Freedom." *Political Theory* 4 (1999), pp. 450—451.

²¹ J. PATOČKA: "Negativní platonismus." In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši I.* Sebrané spisy. Sv. 1. Praha 1996, p. 327.

²² J. PATOČKA: *Přirozený svět jako filosofický problém.* Praha 1992, p. 9.

nothing else to be shown to us other than a meaningful, understandable context in our openness to the world.”²³

Based on Patočka’s philosophy, we can truly realise that any ethical stance and any attempt to take a firm anti-metaphysical position carry within elements of metaphysics, elements of metaphysical claims. Ultimately, when denying the possibility to justify moral principles (no matter how rationally), we cross the borders (of self-doubt) and fall into dogmatism. Rorty seems to be partially aware of this fact, so he is trying, on the one hand, to promote ethical (moral) principles, but on the other hand, to maintain his skeptical or neutral attitude, trying to be an *ironist* when referring to our discovery of the truth in the history of philosophy. However, he acknowledges the presence (less a need) of metaphysics in the history of philosophy, and on this issue he would most likely prefer to retain the position of *agnosticism* — he argues that, even if we do not accept the idea of revealing the truth as something outside of us waiting for its revelation, it does not mean that what is outside of us is false (i.e., that it does not exist).

From the position of an *ironist*, Rorty assumes some form of neutrality as he also represents himself as an *agnostic*, or he tries to stay neutral on whether his conviction in some way reflects the essence of reality.

This irony should be felt in three ways: we should permanently think about the *vocabulary* we use; also, we should realise that the argument formulated in our current vocabulary cannot confirm or silence the doubts that we have; and ultimately, we cannot assume that our vocabulary used to talk about reality is closer to it than any other, whether current or previous, vocabulary.²⁴ The first two arguments lead to more or less skeptical neutrality, because they themselves create the need to constantly question our own beliefs. If we apply this kind of inquiry interminably, the ideal would be the existence of a neutral or skeptical human life, someone who is constantly in a state of doubt and questioning.

As can be seen, Rorty takes only *anti-metaphysical approach*, which aims to deny not only the divine, but at some points also this world, or the idea of ideality of the world, despite the fact that he was often referred to as the philosopher of hope. According to him, “the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secu-

²³ J. PATOČKA: “Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy 3. Praha 2002, p. 63.

²⁴ See R. RORTY: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 73.

lar, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible.”²⁵

Patočka and Rorty find themselves in the *same position* when they consider that the history of philosophy indeed failed to ensure the compelling reasons for the persistence and survival of metaphysics, that to date, the need for it was not justified. However, both of them, in some sense, realise that it is essential for any moral evaluation of the facts. Is metaphysics indeed an area of philosophy that needs to justify its own existence? Is it possible to treat it as a tool for finding answers to man’s own existence in an indifferent world?

Patočka also comments on the question of the *objective of philosophy*. Philosophy does not necessarily provide all the answers. But precisely because philosophy cannot lead to absolute answers, it can lead to answers to the questions about freedom, human dignity and the values in the society. Rorty is a type of philosopher that does not perceive philosophy as a noble discipline, focusing on even more thoughtful questions, on the search for pre-essential world by eliminating the rational ways of addressing all asked questions. He believes that once we stop putting philosophy on a pedestal, above all the other disciplines, we can realise that its main focus is on addressing issues related to the future, which would be the basis for the happiness and good of the individual. It is therefore not necessary to professionalise philosophy or identify it only with rational thinking, clear thinking or finding answers to the questions of genuine, true Being. In order to make philosophy express what our culture is, where it is going, and what values are dominant, we do not need that kind of *philosophical basis* or a programme different from any other social and political discipline. Rorty sees philosophy mainly as a dialogue, as a tool for achieving the good of the human being, and not as a search for some objective truth.

In this context, it should be noted that Rorty has formulated the problem of objective truth, and that in his opinion, if any ever existed, we would be able to *understand the context in which we necessarily live*. And this would be “to give us a mind exactly as long as the universe itself, a lading-list which was a copy of the universe’s own list. What counted as existing, as possible, or as important, for us, would be what really *is* possible, or important. Having copied this list, one could die with satisfaction, having accomplished the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

only task laid upon humanity, *to know the truth*, to be in touch with what is ‘out there.’”²⁶

To such an understanding of truth and similar considerations later developed by Rorty, Patočka answers in the negative, as one of the dominant roles of philosophy is precisely addressing “the problem of Being.”²⁷ Also in this case, there is a choice for the philosopher. Either one follows Plato’s tradition, assuming that Being is harmonious and that moral principles are already predetermined, or one considers Being as something chaotic, something that is not possible to comprehend by reason. Either path shows signs of dogmatism, absence of neutrality.

It is evident that absolutism in any form, whether as a manifesto of nihilism, or as an indisputable metaphysical attitude, is always to some extent dogmatism. The absence of absolute metaphysical sense in Patočka seems closer to the confirmation of human freedom than to pessimistic skepticism.

Philosopher’s activities do not consist in arbitrary explanation of Being or being, but they are “a freedom to keep the being the way it is.”²⁸ Asking questions about Being is an act of freedom for all humans. We might think it seems as if we were talking about the absolute when we think about the nature of the cosmos, but it is quite a different absolute — it is “eternal possibility of freedom, a freedom which is manifested also through philosophical activity, and it is a constant possibility because philosophical reflexion on the world can never lead to any absolute and dogmatic outcome.”²⁹ Freedom is the most basic feature of human existence, its dignity, which stems from the opportunities to think about these things. Therefore, we should not degrade philosophy to a description of things or being, because asking about the structure of our universe, asking who we are, is a basic act of freedom.

Rather than condemn philosophy as a discipline that is not able to uncover the truth, Patočka does not satisfy himself with unproblematic certainty, but he chooses the difficulty of using it to emphasise its possibilities. Thus, “the base of human dignity, the dignity that resides in a special opportunity and skills of people on this planet, is to think about what is the meaning and status in the universe.”³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 26–27.

²⁷ J. PATOČKA: “Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin,” p. 66.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁹ P. LOM: “East meets West — Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty on Freedom,” p. 454.

³⁰ Ibid., 454.

It follows that the problem of Being is a prerequisite for human dignity. Patočka, however, also highlights the possibility to return to traditional forms of metaphysics of Being in the sense of Being: “The return to metaphysics means considering meaningful something that is already set and giving up forever the question of its origin (not time-empirical, but structural and philosophical).”³¹

Patočka does not reject the opportunity to return to the original reflection on metaphysics, but places at the forefront the origin of philosophy that begins with wonder. Philosophy does not apply to specific facts but to a primordial reality, and “does not marvel at various matters, but at this primordial matter. It is clear that there are obvious facts in the world ahead of us, and as a consequence, philosophy must be interested in such facts, it wants to reveal them in its own structure and Being.”³² It is therefore astonishment that stems from the very nature of the human being, contemplating the peculiarity and the miracle of his or her own existence. Astonishment in Patočka’s understanding aims to respect the order of things in the world as they are, and therefore, this kind of respect is also reflected in respecting human freedom and dignity.

Patočka puts emphasis on problems in the world in its totality; therefore, philosophy, liberty, and the search for truth are very close to his heart. For him, the *experience of freedom is always a total experience, the experience of the overall sense*, but at the same time, he builds resistance against the absolute claims and therefore sees freedom also as the *experience of transcendence*. And this is what prevents us from ignoring metaphysics or the interdependencies between freedom and the reality; “the experience of freedom is an experience of *conquest*, of obtaining the freedom, it is not a peaceful possession.”³³ On this basis, we can say that freedom is also always — in the deepest sense — the act of attaining truth because freedom itself is the most fundamental attempt at searching for the truth about the nature of the whole.

³¹ J. PATOČKA: “Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin,” p. 64.

³² J. PATOČKA: “Platón a Evropa.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši II. Sebrané spisy 2*. Praha 1999, p. 200.

³³ J. PATOČKA: “Negativní platonismus,” pp. 322—323.

5. Patočka, Rorty, and freedom

Both philosophers offer vastly different understandings of freedom, which probably derive not only from their philosophical initiatives, but also from the conditions in which their philosophy grew. Patočka and Rorty are supporters of liberal democracy. They base on the questions of freedom, of human suffering and sacrifice, of *solidarity* and prevention of political cruelty, but the diversity of their views on freedom depends on the different notions of *power* which the people and the politicians dispose, and they are different in the perception of the consequences of improper handling or *manipulation of power*.

Patočka also points to continued efforts of the human being to *manipulate nature* and other humans, to determine the direction and rules of existence. People have discovered that they can not only describe or contemplate the nature, Being and existence, but also use their superiority to their abuse. As a result, a person in despair can stop thinking about matters related to Being or his or her own existence and place in life.

Patočka points out that “the danger is just there. The essence of technology is the recognition that it indeed enables unprecedented control of being (procuring it, recalculating it in advance, exploring its effects and impact on each type of entity, and using it), but this inevitably pushes aside the essence of being (and all the essence in it). On this view, the essence of being is understood as something that not only coincides but is simply identical to the control of being ... the deepest danger lies in restricting the access to the original source of truth, in the loss of the authentical truth itself ... Man elevates himself to the role of the lord and master of nature, but in fact he has just become primarily an instrument in the game of all forces that — especially if they are like huge collective powers — handle him impersonally and count him just as a force among other forces, and that consider *truths* only as forces.”³⁴

Patočka was precisely concerned about the fact that modern humans, expecting almost miracles as a result of manipulation with nature, are likely to give up or forget what they actually are themselves. They are likely to forget about their relationship to Being and

³⁴ J. Patočka: “Nebezpečí technizace ve vědě a bytnost techniky jako nebezpečí.” In: J. Patočka: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy 3. Praha 2002, p. 205—206.

about what they are interested in, what being means to them, or what it might mean; in consequence, the question of being manifests itself as a philosophical problem.

Rorty's attempt to change the way of philosophising or arguing does not mean absence of a sense of freedom, moral principles, or values. In his ethics, especially important is the recognition of cruelty towards others and the need for its eradication. Regarding Patočka, this is a moment that can lead to initiation, to transcendence, which thus gains in importance.

Rorty is trying to abandon the traditional thinking, thinking in the spirit of traditional philosophy. "Rorty felt that human beings have an incredible ability to create themselves and their own values in a manner that is just their own."³⁵ Rorty's attention focused on the capability of humans to shape their own lives, which is essentially in accordance with traditions of modernism. Rorty does not allow any limitation on this human ability, but he believes that people can create a good life for themselves, fulfill their needs, and, sooner or later, achieve their goals.

Rorty in his reflections about the human being does not give up the concept of moral responsibility. He wants people to realise themselves, to carry out all their plans successfully, and to feel moral responsibility for others or even for the nature, as can be seen especially in his ability to recognise cruelty as a universal evil. However, the question is what is ultimately more effective — whether it is, on the one hand, Rorty's appeal for recognition of cruelty as a universal evil that may or may not be a sufficient source of establishing responsibility, or on the other hand, Patočka's argument that people need to stay open to transcendence.

Patočka's challenge is obvious. He tries to reconsider the meaning, relevance and importance of transcendence in human life. In the history of political thinking, metaphysics entered a bad spell because human suffering, conflicts and oppressions (social or political) were inflicted on behalf of religious and also secular dogmas resulting from the then modern ideologies. Perhaps these considerations underlie Rorty's attempt to eliminate metaphysics and his appeal to the common sense or the ideas of secular humanism, because most spiritual efforts in themselves carry a risk of degradation of the human as a free being and intolerance towards everything around, thus having destructive consequences. Patočka tries to save meta-

³⁵ P. LOM: "East meets West — Jan Patočka and Richard Rorty on Freedom," p. 456.

physics partly because not every kind of metaphysics must become absolutely dogmatic.

Rorty, unlike Patočka, does not reflect on the problem of the power of the human being over nature, but focuses on the power and possibilities of the human being to shape and mould his or her own life. Rorty wishes to point out endless possibilities and abilities of people, to give to every person the greatest degree of responsibility for him or herself and for other people, and to focus on the recognition of cruelty as a universal evil, against which one should always stand. But the question remains whether recognition of cruelty as a universal evil is a sufficient reason for responsibility and whether Patočka's belief in the need for people to stay open to transcendence is not more effective or even more fundamental in this respect. I think we should follow Patočka, since the liberal theory often ignores our relationship to the being, to nature, and to the environment in which we live; it appeals to cruelty arising particularly from our relationship to other people. It is possible to defend or at least to understand Rorty's position, pointing out that metaphysics has a very bad reputation in the history of political thinking, because its scope was limited primarily to giving empty promises. The negative framing that it receives comes mainly from conflict, violence, and oppression that were inflicted in the name of absolute religious dogmas, or from the excesses related to secular dogmas of all modernist ideologies. We should mainly focus on the ideas of sober, secular humanism so that we can stay immune to the dangers of intolerance and destruction. However, not every metaphysics must necessarily become dogmatic. Patočka's thoughts about freedom are also a valuable contribution to the understanding of the human being of today, as they appeal to spirituality connected with a certain skepticism and humility and draw attention to the Socratic model of leadership combined with humility, seeking an undogmatic openness to the possibility of transcendence. I am convinced that there is no timeless moral ideal of the human as a free being; any such model is always immersed in a specific context. What Patočka and Rorty offer may be a good foundation for building liberal ideas and beliefs about the possibility of fulfillment of individual freedom.

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