META: RESEARCH IN HERMENEUTICS, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY
VOL. XVI, NO. 1 / JUNE 2024: 111-132, ISSN 2067-3655, www.metajournal.org

Politics, Morality and Nothingness: On the Coherence of Jan Patočka's Reflections on Sacrifice

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Abstract

One of the most perplexing notions in Jan Patočka's philosophy is "sacrifice for nothing", a form of self-sacrifice with no positive content that transcends every particular thing, object, goal or ideal. This concept is puzzling since Patočka was a dissident and one of the spokespersons of Charta 77 movement, providing philosophical and ethical substance to dissidents' actions. In his "Charta 77 texts" and other overtly political texts, Patočka formulated an ethico-political conception of sacrifice, arguing that authentic politics is defined by a strong commitment to unconditional moral principles, such as justice, freedom and human rights, and that these principles are things for which it is "worthwhile to suffer". However, in his mature phenomenological reflections on sacrifice and war Patočka appears to distance himself from ethical and political considerations, moving into the Heideggerian territory of nothingness, Being and confrontation with one's finitude. What is the relationship between Patočka's ethico-political and existential-ontological reflections on sacrifice? In this paper, I argue that they are internally consistent, the latter serving as an indispensable philosophical grounding of the former. The unifying element of these diverse explorations of sacrifice is Patočka's comprehensive critique of modernity and technoscience.

Keywords: Patočka, sacrifice, solidarity of the shaken, politics, morality, war, nothingness

Introduction

Jan Patočka's notion of sacrifice is usually interpreted as forming a significant part of the Czech dissident movement.

* Funding: This project has received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), agreement No. S-PD-22-34.

Patočka's own life, his decision to become a spokesperson of Charta 77 movement and especially his death after a lengthy interrogation by StB secret police, makes the intrinsic link between sacrifice and politics compelling to many interpreters (Tucker 2000, 84-88; Bolton 2012, 152-160). Moreover, the most political of Patočka's texts—the so-called "Charta 77 texts", which were distributed underground in 1977 and made a considerable impact on Czech dissidents—clearly indicate that Patočka regarded sacrifice as a manifestation of genuine political action. His famous statement that "there are things for which it is worthwhile to suffer", which we find in his text "What We Can and Cannot Expect from Charta 77", constitutes for many a definite proof that for Patočka sacrifice is inherently political (Patočka 1989, 346).

On the other hand, Patočka's reflections on sacrifice that we find in his more strictly philosophical writings present a more complex picture. The most ambiguous idea in Patočka's *oeuvre* is "sacrifice for nothing", a self-sacrifice that overcomes the technological understanding of the world and opens up a possibility of a new relation to truth and Being (Patočka 2022, 292). Remarkably, this radical or authentic sacrifice distances itself from any "positive content" (Patočka 2022, 291). Patočka contrasts this genuine form of sacrifice with an inferior one—sacrifice for something. This is confusing because Patočka's "Charta 77 texts" can hardly be read as advocating sacrifice for *nothing*. In these texts, Patočka argues that politics must be subordinated to unconditional moral principles, such as justice, human rights, equality and freedom (Patočka 1989, 341-344). This raises the following questions: what is the relationship between moral-political ideals and nothingness? What does the latter term denote precisely for Patočka? Is there a continuity or rather a contradiction between Patočka's "Charta 77 texts" and his phenomenological considerations on sacrifice? In this paper, I will argue that there is a deep continuity between Patočka's overtly political and philosophical writings on sacrifice, and that "sacrifice for nothing" has a latent, if not direct, political and moral meaning. I submit that Charta 77, Patočka himself and other Central-East European dissidents acted and protested against the communist regime in the spirit

of Patočka's sacrifice for nothing, although this sacrifice included a strong commitment to certain moral principles.

1. Politics, self-sacrifice and moral responsibility

I shall begin my analysis from "Charta 77 texts". Patočka structures his "The Obligation to Resist Injustice" around a central distinction between technology and morality. He criticizes the modern hope that progress of science and technology would generate a new morality. Quite the opposite: the horrors of the twentieth century indicate a staggering demise of moral standards. Hence Patočka's claim that humanity needs "something that in its very essence is not technological, something that is not merely instrumental: we need a morality that is not merely tactical and situational but absolute." (Patočka 1989, 340) To counter the tyranny of the technological and the (mis)use of great power wielded by the modern state, humans need to regain belief in the *unconditional* validity of universal moral principles, since morality is what defines and expresses our humanity.

Patočka specifies his argument with a reference to the idea of human rights. The latter represents the notion that everyone—people, states, societies—are "subject to the sovereignty of moral sentiment, that they recognize something unconditional that is higher than they are". (Patočka 1989, 341) For Patočka, our will to act morally empowers us to sacrifice our daily comforts and sense of security, to overcome our greed and fear, and to reach the level of genuine freedom and responsibility. Charta 77 is a shining example of the spirit of solidarity that re-actualizes the meaning of morality. The central argument of Patočka's Charta 77 essays is directly related to the experience of sacrifice and suffering:

> Note that our people have once more become aware that there are things for which it is worthwhile to suffer, that the things for which we might have to suffer are those which make life worthwhile, and that without them all our arts, literature, and culture become mere trades leading only from the desk to the pay office and back. We know all that now, not in the least thanks to Charta 77 and all it has meant. (Patočka 1989, 346)

By distinguishing the "strictly political" from the moral, Patočka stresses that Charta 77 is not a typically political, but instead a "personal and moral" movement. This claim is reminiscent of similar statements made by other Central-East European dissidents who saw their resistance as "anti-politics" or "anti-political politics". In this context, anti-politics refers to activities that are more fundamental than intra-party bickering and fight for institutional power in the existing system. Rather, anti-political politics seeks a moral and existential transformation of the whole society, which might subsequently have far-reaching political consequences as well (Skilling, Wilson 1991). Such rhetoric was, of course, partly strategic: Charta 77 and other dissident movements behind the Iron Curtain knew well that if they openly declared their political aspirations, they would suffer much harsher treatment from the communist regime. The fact that the latter still treated dissidents harshly is a testament to the fact that their *deep politicity* was recognized as such. Even dissidents themselves were not entirely consistent on this point. As Patočka admitted, a public proclamation that morality and not the state is the highest authority was highly political: "clear conscience and decency have proved to be also *a powerful factor of political reality*". (Patočka 1989, 344, emphasis added) For Patočka, Charta 77 "never sought more than to educate", yet we can clearly see that this public humbleness is cunning, for what can be more politically challenging to totalitarian regimes than citizens learning to become "free persons, self-motivated and responsible" and "coming to understand that there is more to life than fear and gain"? (Patočka 1989, 346)

The analysis of Patočka's Charta 77 texts shows how much emphasis he puts on the ethical and political dimension of sacrifice. For him, political existence becomes meaningful only when citizens summon their courage to sacrifice their daily comforts, egocentrism and sense of security in favor of universal moral principles, of something that is higher than mere survival. Following Hannah Arendt, Patočka argues that this self-transcending orientation lies at the very origins of the concept of politics or *polis* (Patočka 1996, 41-43). Accordingly, he regards living under a communist regime a deeply

impoverished existence; only radical sacrifice can wake people up from mass conformism and passivity. Sacrifice is thus inevitably related to suffering, discomfort and risk, but Patočka insists that there are things in life for which it is worthwhile to suffer, and only these things make us truly human (Patočka 1989, 343, 346) Notably, even in these political texts Patočka cannot resist a broader philosophical critique of modernity. He contrasts morality not only to the communist political apparatus, but more generally to the "technological" as such. Actualized by sacrifice, unconditionality of moral principles is a key element of authentic human existence that runs counter to the instrumental means-ends logic of technoscience, a potentially "destructive" mindset that is grounded in a belief that "any aim whatever justifies any means whatever" (Patočka 1989, 346). In sync with his line of reasoning in *Heretical Essays*, Patočka argues that dissident resistance is needed "to break free of the bondage of wars and near-wars", a bondage that has become an essence of the twentieth century.

The importance of ethico-political sacrifice can be glanced in Patočka's other writings as well. Just before assuming the role of the spokesperson of Charta 77, in December 1976, Patočka wrote a short article "On the Matters of *The Plastic People of the Universe* and DG 307", in which he cryptically discussed the role of young musicians in Czechoslovakia whose nonconformism prompted the communist regime to put them on trial for charges of "hooliganism". These trials became the catalyst for the creation of Charta 77. In this rather neglected text, Patočka writes about youth as a "guest that comes from the unknown to begin life anew", youth as a power of negativity or ability to say "no" to the stifling conformism of society and political elites. In this context, sacrifice gives rise to "joy" that comes from "struggle against relief, against comfort, leveling, dishonesty to oneself and to others, against talking oneself into untruth and confusion". (Patočka 2017, 25) The political potential of youthful courage lies in its ability to disrupt the habituated routines of everyday life and to arouse the spirit of older people:

> For the only real help and care for the other comes when I step forward and do what I have to do, whether in hiding or out in the open,

> whether anyone knows about it or not, and perchance let my awakened conscience awaken the conscience of others. (Patočka 2017, 25)

In another text from 1976, "Heroes of Our Time", Patočka writes about several inspiring persons whom he sees as exemplifying a genuinely heroic stance. In his discussion of Sakharov and Oppenheimer, Patočka brings up the notion of sacrifice, stating that they "sacrificed themselves, their positions, their work, their goals, the values and ideals they had once taken for granted". (Patočka 1981, 13) Later in the text, Patočka invokes the idea of "will to truth" or truthful existence, which only becomes pure in the souls of "the repressed, the reviled, the humiliated, the dead". The latter have truth on their side, while the powerful, the rulers are "already damned". Patočka is adamant to stress that as human beings, as political and ethical agents we cannot remain *indifferent* to the sacrifice of the dead who dared to live in truth; their sacrifice is binding on our conscience, making us *obligated* to honor their deeds and continue their mission, because in their sacrifice "they *are* us" (Patočka 1981, 13-14).

Interpreters usually claim that Patočka only became interested in the concept of sacrifice late in his career (Perryman-Holt 2015, 23). This view is a rather misleading. Sacrifice *as a phenomenon* (not necessarily as a term) interested Patočka already in his early career. In his 1938 text "Reflections on Defeat", dedicated to Czechoslovakia's surrender to the Nazis, Patočka reproaches his fellow intellectuals for their cowardice and inability to arouse the spirit of resistance in the Czech nation. Their arrogance, self-importance, immaturity and lack of a "vivid feeling of responsibility toward people" are harshly judged by Patočka as a betrayal of their duties as intellectuals (Patočka 2020, 30). He writes about the need to "stand up as a nation courageous but humble, creative but quiet, hardworking but irreproachable, modest but with a lively spirit" (Patočka 2020, 31). Patočka regards sacrifice as an act of self-transcendence, overcoming one's "snobbishness" and negative freedom to forge authentic ties of solidarity with the whole nation. Notably, Patočka adds that it was not moral ideals or principles that betrayed the people, but intellectuals who were "unable to apply them

properly to reality" (Patočka 2020, 30). Already in 1938, we see that sacrifice for moral ideals and one's political community lies at the heart of Patočka's understanding of the duty of an intellectual.

A year later, in 1939, Patočka published a text called "Life in Balance, Life in Amplitude", which is structured around a distinction between day and night that will later become central to his *Heretical Essays*. Life in balance, or the order of the day, is the philosophy of stability, harmony and peace:

> The first type of philosophy is an expression of the common, of the levelling out, of the everyday. The everyday with its normality, in which nothing substantial happens, in which there are no radical incisions, and when in the end the grayness of life triumphs over everything—this is the character of the understanding that we encounter here. Not that it would be a boring or bored philosophy; on the contrary, it is very optimistic and sees life clearly, positively, and practically. (Patočka 2020, 32-33)

Life in balance is an Enlightenment worldview which believes that all societal failures and imperfections can eventually be eliminated with better calculation and more perfect application of scientific knowledge. In a conscious turning away from the finitude of human existence, from "nothingness that will someday embrace us completely", the order of the day conceals the uncomfortable, unruly, imperfectible aspects of the human condition in the "frenzy of work and activity" (Patočka 2020, 37). By contrast, life in amplitude is a conscious overcoming of one's ego and the confines of "life in enclave", it is a reaching out to the boundaries of existence, to the "universal horizon" (Patočka 2020, 38-39). Life in amplitude accepts human imperfectability and even regards *pain* and *suffering* as a welcome fact of life, a potential gateway to truth and moral clarity. To achieve that, we need to, so to say, open an existential wound in ourselves: "we must let grow in ourselves the uncomfortable, the irreconcilable, the mysterious". (Patočka 2020, 39) In the ambit of this unbridgeable chasm, a person receives an opportunity to *test* oneself, a test that is experienced as a *protest* against everything daily and commonplace. This prompts Patočka to claim that "all of the true lovers of the eternal and infinite are above all those who have gone through adversity and pain."

(Patočka 2020, 41) This view is in line with the earlier text "Reflections on Defeat": Czech intellectuals who did not dare to risk their comfort, security and potentially even their lives wanted to live a painless, riskless, comfortable life in balance. Refusing a life in amplitude, which is a life of struggle and suffering, they forfeited their duty to seek truth and lead a responsible life.

It is noteworthy that in his early texts Patočka was not only extolling ethical and political sacrifice, but also identified the worrying tendencies of modern deformations of the experience of sacrifice. In his 1946 text "Ideology and Life in the Idea", Patočka criticized collectivism and totalitarian ideologies, especially socialism, observing that "the demands on what the individual was required to sacrifice for society were almost unlimited" (Patočka 2020, 46). In a collectivist worldview, persons are regarded merely as small cogs in a gigantic state machine, whose sacrifice (often on a massive scale) is seen as instrumental in achieving an ideologically predetermined *bonum futurum*. The experience of self-sacrifice gets distorted and manipulated as we witness a grand project of sacrificing millions of others (enemies and fellow citizens as well) who are seen as minuscule items "in the general accounting of nature". Ideologies, including those that systematically employ the noble rhetoric of sacrifice in their propaganda, consider humans to be mere things among other things, seizing them externally, "like certain forces in the overall complex of forces".

Ideological utilization of sacrifice has nothing to do with genuine freedom that Patočka considers to be "the Idea of Man"; the latter is the true wellspring of *self*-sacrifice and what he would later call "care for the soul". (Patočka 2020, 43-36) Already in this essay, Patočka alludes to the paradox inherent to the experience of sacrifice, a paradox that will preoccupy him later in more well-known writings: "to the logic of the Idea belongs the *inner* significance of the highest sacrifice; the fact that what is a sheer loss from an external viewpoint, can be inner fulfilment (regardless of all external purposes, such as the kind of response that death for the Idea and its propagandistic significance awakens)." (Patočka 2020, 48) What captures Patočka's attention is this enigmatic but genuine

feeling of fulfilment and inner freedom that one experiences "right in the fall, in sacrifice, in the *middle* of the struggle, without the result having been attained, and thus without justification by this result". (Patočka 2020, 49-50) This statement anticipates Patočka's later reflections on sacrifice as inherently non-instrumental and meaningful "*solely in itself*" (Patočka 1996, 130).

Our analysis of Patočka's notion of sacrifice as a political and ethical phenomenon is corroborated by many interpreters. In Francesco Tava's estimation, Patočka regards sacrifice as an ultimate expression of *ethical action* or *ethical movement* that is political in a deeper, more profound sense than everyday politics (Tava 2016, 41, 46, 55). Edward F. Findlay links Patočka's formulations of sacrifice to political action: "With this analysis [of the concept of sacrifice] he both justifies continued dissidence and offers solace to those whose personal sacrifice is overwhelming." (Findlay 2002, 139) Jacky Yuen-Hung Tai convincingly argues that sacrifice gives rise to political solidarity that is an intersubjective, "communal" relation between the person who sacrifices and those who witness this act (Tai 2020, 224). However, the question remains: what is the relationship between the politico-ethical sacrifice and Patočka's notion of "sacrifice for nothing", a self-sacrifice "with no positive content"? Is it the same or two different phenomena? In search for an answer, we must now turn to Patočka's mature phenomenological reflections on sacrifice.

2. Sacrifice for nothing

The clearest indication that Patočka modified his understanding of sacrifice is manifest in his so-called *Varna Lecture*, where he shifts his focus away from ethical and political ideals to the notion of nothingness: "It is not a sacrifice for something or for someone, even though in a certain sense it is a sacrifice for everything and for all. In a certain essential sense, it is a sacrifice for nothing, if thereby we mean that which is no existing particular." (Patočka 2022, 292) *Sacrifice for nothing*—this is perhaps the most enigmatic formulation in Patočka's reflections on sacrifice. What does "nothingness" refer to? For Patočka, nothingness is the region of exceptional,

boundary experiences which allow humans, at least temporarily, to detach themselves from pre-given meanings of the day, and to glimpse a possibility of a new, deeper meaning of life. Nothingness is negativity that interrogates our commonsense perception of the world, introducing a dimension of problematicity and initiating a fundamental transformation of our relation to truth and Being, a process that changes "the landscape of life's fundamental meanings". (Patočka 1996, 131) Nothingness is *no-thing*, no particular thing or object, it is an existential horizon that allows us to draw back "from the realm of what can be managed and ordered", and to enter "an explicit relation to that which, not being anything actual itself, serves as the ground of the appearing of all that is active and in that sense rules over all. Here Being already "presents" itself to us, not in a refusal but explicitly." (Patočka 2022, 286) We can clearly see that Patočka, in an unmistakably Heideggerian way, draws a close connection between nothingness and Being, arguing that nothingness appears "as a guise in which Being presents itself in its difference from beings, from the content of the world." (Patočka 2015, 126) While concentrating on *some*-thing in our daily lives (work, career, hobbies, interests), we deal with beings; only when we leap into the region of *no*-thing, can we hope to develop an explicit relation to Being. Patočka writes:

> Being is initially revealed as the "Nothing", as the shock that, like a flash of lightning, halted all work at the assembly line of relative meaning, which had hid its finitude from itself. "Nothingness", then, appears like a flash of Being. (Patočka 2015, 108)

Patočka expresses this paradoxical proximity between nothingness and Being as a dialectic of negativity and positivity. Distinguishing between "naïve" (deficient) and "repeated" (authentic) modes of sacrifice, Patočka argues that the former is structured positively, i. e., oriented toward concrete persons, communities, social or political ideals; by contrast, in the repeated sacrifice those ideals or significant others recede to the background:

> The entire mode of acting needs to be understood as a protest, not against individual concrete experiences but, in principle, against the understanding by which they are borne. From this perspective, the

> repeated sacrifice is something no longer concerned with any positive content. […] Without ignoring or making light of certain concrete historical social goals, they [humans engaged in repeated sacrifice] have another focus. In giving themselves for something, they dedicate themselves to that of which it cannot be said that it "is" something, or something objective. (Patočka 2022, 291)

The dialectic of negativity and positivity becomes even more nuanced when Patočka contrasts two forms of positivity. The first is the positivity of the day that is oriented towards things, objects, and values that help organize the world of work and consumption. The second is the positivity borne from the leap into negativity, into an unsheltered abyss of absolute freedom and a decisive detachment from things. This shift from relative positivity to an absolute one is made possible by the embrace of nothingness:

> In all these experiences one sees manifest what a great contemporary thinker had elucidated in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*—revelation of the "nothing" as a guise in which Being presents itself in its difference from beings, from the content of the world. What becomes apparent is the discovery of the *incommensurable positivity of Being*, the discovery of meaning (that is of something comprehensible or significant) beyond the limits of significances drawn from the relation to human life, its reinforcement and extension. It is a meaning that begins where all relative significations and all relative meanings come to an end. (Patočka 2015, 126, second emphasis added)

In another memorable formulation, Patočka argues that by genuinely sacrificing themselves humans "win their humanity in the true sense of the word" (Patočka 2022, 291). Again, humanity is not *some*-thing, it is not a manageable object that can be put "on order", incorporated into political strategies or propaganda campaigns; rather, it is *no*-thing, a negativity proclaiming that humanity as an *ontological* ground of appearance and relation to truth is irreducible to any *ontic* uses and manipulations.

Patočka's reflections on the concept of sacrifice are perplexing precisely because this experience cannot be reduced to a clear-cut formula, doctrine or norm. In authentic sacrifice, "human beings gain access to something beyond the given, yet that 'something higher' provides no firm ground or dogma" (Leufer 2017, 38). In our daily lives we strive to achieve closure through clear answers, unambiguous doctrines and comfortable

worldviews. Patočka's entire philosophical *élan* is directed against this sort of moral, political and metaphysical closure. Yet he understands that for most people the leap into the abyss proves too demanding. Hence their wish to treat this "horror of the void" as a "*thing* that can be grasped, tread upon, manipulated, commanded". (Patočka 2015, 106) They want to make sacrifice another *unproblematic* slogan that could be utilized for specific political purposes.

3. War, frontline and solidarity of the shaken

Although Patočka's idea of "sacrifice for nothing" is now clearer, a key issue remains unresolved: why did he shift his focus away from ethico-political vocabulary to more existential-ontological discourse of nothingness and Being? What is the relationship between his ethico-political reflections on sacrifice and his later phenomenological reflections? Did Patočka become disillusioned with political action, perhaps even with universal moral ideals that he emphasized so strongly on other occasions? To answer these questions, we should consult his *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*.

Interpreters typically express their "shock" regarding the tone and content of the Sixth Heretical Essay (Ricoeur 1996, viii). What is so shocking in this text? First, it is quite unusual to claim, as does Patočka, that the forces of "the day"—the forces of progress, science and technology, of everyday politics with its high-sounding ideals of civilization, peace, democracy and equality—are in fact responsible for the intensification and prolongation of war experience in the 20th century (Patočka 1996, 130). Second, it is striking to many that Patočka sees the possibility of overcoming this war-intensifying logic of the day in the horizon of "the night", the pinnacle of the frontline experience (Patočka 1996, 124-125, 130-132). How is it possible to seek "a solution" to the deep problems of the 20th century at the very *peak* of their practical manifestation?

To get to the bottom of these perplexities, we must begin from Patočka's broader interpretation of modernity. Relying on Husserl, Heidegger and Arendt's investigations, Patočka sees modernity as a gradual entrenchment of "technoscience", an epoch of growing domination of mathematical and natural

sciences that systematically reduce all reality to quantifiable and calculable material, to resources that can be managed and manipulated. Humans are inevitably drawn into this world-picture as well, reduced to their roles (social functions) and objectified as things, tools or means to achieve certain ends (Patočka 1996, 116). Importantly, technoscience conceals the question of our relation to Being, instead focusing all attention on beings. What is lost in this process is the sense of mystery and a quest for deeper meaning (Patočka 1996, 117). Having lost the consciousness of a relation to Being, humans have instead developed an impressive technical mastery of the world and thus become a mighty force:

> Especially in their social being, they became a gigantic transformer, releasing cosmic forces accumulated and bound over the eons. It seems as if humans have become a grand energy accumulator in a world of sheer forces, on the one hand making use of those forces to exist and multiply, yet on the other hand themselves integrated into the same process, accumulated, calculated, utilized, and manipulated like any other state of energy. (Patočka 1996, 116)

In Patočka's view, "metaphysics of force" underpinning the technoscientific mindset is not only one possible viewpoint among many others, but a worldview that has significantly changed our perception of reality. Everything exists *only* to an extent that it can be accumulated and exploited as forces or reserves of energy (Patočka 1996, 116-117). For human beings, this understanding of the world generates a sense of alienation from themselves and from nature, eventually generating a deep-rooted feeling of boredom: "The most sophisticated inventions are boring if they do not lead to an exacerbation of the Mystery concealed by what we discover, what is revealed to us." (Patočka 1996, 114) The outcome of humankind's growing scientific-technological capacities has thus been a steady increase in "quantifiable meaninglessness" (Patočka 1996, 116).

How is the question of war related to these reflections on modernity? Patočka insists that the quest for authentic existence is inextinguishable in human beings; where boredom and alienation reign supreme, one can expect people to search for substitutes of meaning, various artificial shortcuts toward an "elevated" sense of existence. Even those who seem content in their forgetfulness of Being might still yearn for authenticity

in the deep recesses of their souls. And since most genuine avenues to deep connection with others as well as relation to truth are foreclosed by technoscience, humans tend to seek alternatives in (self-)destructive ways. It may be gambling, violent sexual exploits, the use of substances, radical aesthetic pleasures and other idiosyncrasies, but it may also be collective endeavors: wars, revolutions or terrorism. The logic of the day thus becomes the breeding ground of *excessive* intensification of wars and interpersonal animosities. Hence Patočka's gloomy interpretation of the twentieth century *as war* (Patočka 1996, 124).

Patočka acknowledges that the 20th century was full of sacrifices and sacrificial rhetoric: tens of millions of people were sacrificed for various military objectives and political ideals (Patočka 1996, 129; Patočka 2022, 289). Patočka finds this sort of sacrifice problematic and calls it "relative" or "inauthentic". This standard understanding of sacrifice is economic or instrumental in nature: we sacrifice something (others or ourselves) to gain or achieve something, thus taking part in an "economy of exchange". For Patočka, one of the most troubling facts is the heavy use of high-sounding moral and political ideals in political-military discourses that justified last century's colossal sacrifices. This tendency encompasses the ideal of peace itself: "Peace and the day necessarily rule by sending humans to death in order to assure *others* a day in the future in the form of progress, of a free and increasing expansion, of possibilities they lack today." (Patočka 1996, 129)

Here Patočka expands his intuitions first formulated in "Ideology and Life in the Idea". For him, the issue lies not with the ideals themselves, but with the fact that they tend to be coopted by technoscience. The latter is such a dominant worldview of modernity that it draws into its orbit not only things, nature and persons, but political and moral ideals as well (Patočka 1996, 132). The consequence of this process is the utilization of values by the state for economic and technological purposes. A techoscientific mindset turns both normative ideals and people who subscribe to them into useful tools, thus reinforcing the stranglehold of metaphysics of Force (Patočka 1996, 136). In modern wars, moral ideals often serve as

catalysts of dehumanization, denigrating the humanity of one's enemies as well as one's co-citizens, who are regarded not as unique persons with irreducible dignity but rather as cogs in a grand ideological project and war machine. In this way, official sacrificial rhetoric loses its moral core and instead speeds up the further release and global extension of Force. In Patočka's own lifetime, the prime example of this process was Soviet communism. Soviet crimes against humanity were largely unacknowledged because they were couched in the rhetoric of necessary sacrifices for noble ideals (Majernik 2017, 29-30). Soviet criminality is a paradigmatic case of instrumental sacrifice, a sacrifice of others for something that sounds noble on paper. Crucially for Patočka, a communist deformation of the meaning of sacrifice greatly reinforced the dominance of technoscience.

When geared towards the ends of the day—political programs, war aims, ideological projects—the rhetoric of values loses its truth-disclosing capacity. It becomes instrumental, manipulative, detached from an existential and moral nature of human reality. In Patočka's worldview, values and principles are only genuine when rooted in ceaseless search for the truth of Being, the recognition of our finitude and mutual vulnerability in human relationships (Patočka 1996, 130). These aspects belong to the *ontological* level of existence. Patočka broadens his analysis of sacrifice not because he disavows his own genuine commitment to certain moral and political ideals—he is truthful in his Charta 77 and other political texts—but because he sees that the real battle for the future of humanity lies at the more foundational, ontological level. For Patočka, the true "saving grace" of self-sacrifice is not a political-military victory in this or that battle, but rather a fundamental transformation of our view of ourselves, others and nature. That is why even in the Charta 77 texts Patočka puts his hopes in "something that in its very essence is not technological, something that is not merely instrumental". We may conclude that conceptualization of sacrifice as an alternative and challenge to technoscientific thinking is a bridge linking Patočka's ethico-political and existential-ontological reflections.

For dissidents and other political actors, this distinctly Patočkean struggle against the spirit of technoscience might have seemed irrelevant and beside the point, especially when more urgent practical issues were at stake. Nonetheless, Patočka glimpses that ethico-political sacrifice contains a potential to achieve more than just a victory in a limited spatio-temporal context of particular states, nations or regimes (Patočka 1996, 130-131, 134-135). He sees the possibility of conversion (*metanoia*) from the daily, particularized positivity of specific goals to a much more fundamental rethinking—taking place in the abyss of *no-thing-ness*—of the universal horizon of Being, the very grounds or conditions of our understanding that encompasses our moral and political beliefs. In a virtuous circle, the horizon of nothingness then makes our normative beliefs more real and authentic. For instance, only when we cease to view others instrumentally, merely as things or functions (ontological level), can we genuinely appreciate the idea of human rights (practical level), which otherwise tends to ossify into a bureaucratic abstraction or ideological dogma.

Crucially, Patočka interprets this leap into nothingness not as a solitary, but as an interpersonal, communal act. Sacrifice for nothing thus contains a potential to create an "authentic transindividuality" (Patočka 1996, 131). A supportive network of those who managed to leap into nothingness makes this liminal experience "a factor of history". Patočka calls this fellowship "the solidarity of the shaken" (Patočka 1996, 134). It is generated by a common confrontation with death and finitude, by "understanding what life and death are all about, and so what history is about" (Patočka 1996, 134). Patočkean political solidarity is thus more inclusive and global than any ethnicity, nationality or religious identity. It may initially spring from the latter but realizes itself fully by overcoming ontic particularities and reaching the ontological dimension of intersubjectivity. This dimension reveals our common humanity and every human being's irreducible dignity. At the core of this fellowship we find a characteristic negativity, a protest against a technical, instrumental worldview:

> The solidarity of the shaken can say "no" to the measures of mobilization which make the state of war permanent. It will not offer

> positive programs but will speak, like Socrates' *daimonion*, in warnings and prohibitions. It can and must create a spiritual authority, become a spiritual power that could drive the warring world to some restraint, rendering some acts and measures impossible. (Patočka 1996, 135)

To understand Patočka's intentions better, we may recall his and other dissidents' claim that Charta 77 was not a directly political movement but rather engaged in "anti-politics". Sacrifice for nothing is anti- or a-political in the sense that its aim is not to sacrifice for something specific, for a particular political goal, program or policy. It is not part of the daily business of party politics, a reshuffling of political elites or institutional muscle-flexing. Instead, sacrifice for nothing uncovers and problematizes the innermost core of our self-understanding and perception of the world, revealing the forgotten possibility to exist differently, unclouded by technoscientific premises. Though dissident "anti-politics" is primarily negative in nature, at its peak it reveals an immense potential to create something truly meaningful through the enactment of the ontological difference (Leufer 2017, 40-44). Genuine sacrifice becomes indirectly political as it urges us to pursue our explicitly political ideals *with a changed view of life,* a different attitude that strengthens interpersonal solidarity—the solidarity of the shaken—*despite* our ideological differences (Patočka 1996, 134-135).

4. Responsibility and the orgiastic

The question that still preoccupies Patočka's readers is this: does he "celebrate" war, the night and the frontline experience? If war pushes the logic of the day to its limit, uncovering the dimension of nothingness and allowing us to escape the "enslavement to life", does it constitute a new normative orientation? To answer this question, we need to discuss another key distinction between the ordinary (everyday) and exceptional (orgiastic, demonic) that Patočka introduces in the Fifth Heretical Essay. The demonic releases us from the daily toil and burden of responsibility, binding us to a mystical or transcendent power that completely "enraptures" us, opening a path to the real meaning of life that has been hidden from us

in our everydayness. The demonic ushers in a transformation of life that allows us "to forget the entire dimension of the struggle for ourselves, forget responsibility and escape, letting ourselves be drawn into a new, open dimension as if only now true life stood before us, as if this "new life" had no need to care for the dimension of responsibility." (Patočka 1996, 99) By contrast, the realm of the ordinary is the realm of work and pursuit of one's interests, of the "self-enslavement of life, of its bondage to itself" (Patočka 1996, 99). The night, or the demonic, is clearly significant for Patočka as it opens up a possibility to detach oneself from this bondage to life and things, to question the self-evidence of our immersion in social roles and anonymous processes of the technological age. Patočka seems to appreciate the fact that the night introduces risk, passion, struggle and genuine excitement into the monotony of the day. However, Patočka acknowledges the limitations of the orgiastic as well.

The demonic is insufficient for Patočka as a way out of the malady of modernity because it lacks *responsibility*: "The demonic needs to be brought into a relation with responsibility as originally and primarily it is not." (Patočka 1996, 100) The orgiastic entails a complete loss of the self, an essentially *passive* (though perhaps passionate) posture and complete immersion in this new revelation. In the "ecstasy" of self-abnegation, the individuality of a person is willingly abandoned as an unpalatable burden. Such ecstasy can take many forms: religious, mystical, occult movements with rigid hierarchies and divine-like leaders, but also political, (para)military and ideological formations. In parallel with Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, Patočka indicates that the loss of self and flight from responsibility inherent to *ek-stasis* of the demonic is among the chief causes of the intensification of war experience in the 20th century. This prompts Patočka to insist that overcoming the rule of the day must be rooted in care for the soul and responsibility (Patočka 1996, 108). Responsibility is of paramount importance for Patočka because it serves as a vital link between directly political sacrifice and sacrifice for nothing. Without the mediation of responsibility—a theme that is central to Patočka's political reflections on sacrifice discussed above—a collective leap into the night may become malevolent,

resulting in horrific atrocities. Similarly, as I have argued above, instrumental sacrifice for normative ideals may also turn monstrous and dehumanizing. To avoid these extremes, a leap into nothingness is needed, but *without losing oneself in total submission and irresponsible behavior*. In short, a path to genuine self-achievement goes through the mediation of responsibility. It is therefore safe to conclude that Patočka is not a war romantic. The night and the frontline are crucial for Patočka only to an extent that these exceptional experiences activate an acknowledgement of one's finitude and give birth to the spirit of problematicity, questioning the dominance of technoscientific view of the world.

5. Conclusion

There is a deep continuity between Patočka's overtly political writings on sacrifice and his philosophical reflections on "sacrifice for nothing". Their meeting point is Patočka's comprehensive critique of technoscience as a dominant world-picture of modernity. On the one hand, Patočka's "Charta 77 texts" are peculiar since he writes not only about human rights, equality, freedom and justice, which is typical for dissident discourse, but also about the need to ground human life in something that is not technological. On the other hand, his mature explorations of the meaning of sacrifice reveal that the latter possesses a latent political dimension because of its potential to transform not only our relation to truth and Being, but our interpersonal and communal relationships as well. Such potential lies behind Patočka's concept of "solidarity of the shaken". This is consistent with dissident "anti-politics" that seeks a deep moral transformation of the whole society rather than ordinary institutional politics. Sacrifice for nothing, which might at first seem dubious as a choice of words, is an arousal of the spirit of problematicity and ceaseless questioning, a power of negativity that allows us to detach ourselves from things and think about the whole, our place in the universe and the nature of human existence. Inevitably, this sort of sacrifice is a *protest* against political regimes that impose an unproblematic, unfree, closed picture of the world.

Crucially, Patočka adds that sacrifice for nothing is at the same time sacrifice "for everything and for all". It means that genuine self-sacrifice opens a universal horizon of meaning that is globally inclusive. Initially, a sacrificial act may begin with a political goal in mind (to overthrow a tyrant or regain national independence), but it only becomes a genuine "saving grace" when it aims at something even higher. The same with solidarity of the shaken: this sort of togetherness is not ethnic, national or religious—it is global and, in that sense, truly human. For instance, a truly authentic achievement of sacrifice is not the augmentation of American or Czech national fellow-feeling, but a fundamental change of our attitude toward other human beings *as human beings*. That does not mean that the former is meaningless or unimportant, but through it one can go deeper and create a previously unimagined solidarity with others.

Patočka was well-aware that sacrifice for nothing had a very slim chance of influencing political life since we "continue to be fascinated by force, allow it to lead us along its paths, fascinating and deceiving us, making us its dupes." (Patočka 1996, 132) After wars and frontline revelations, people typically return to the old routines of life in balance, again focusing on the superficial layer of existence: work, career, entertainment, consumption. (Although some cannot bear the contrast and commit suicide.) That is why Patočka insists we should maintain the heretical spirit of negativity even in peacetime, even in a liberal democracy, even after a military-political victory and subsequent normalization of life. Otherwise, we quickly become complacent, nurturing care for possession and domination instead of care for the soul. In this context, sacrifice for nothing represents the key source of hope for humanity, repeatedly awakening our non-indifference and sense of responsibility for the fate of the world.

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