'*Quicquid Cogitat*': On the Uses and Disadvantages of Subjectivity

Ludger Hagedorn

Abstract 'Life' is the magic word for decisive currents of modern philosophy. Much of the tone for this debate over the last one and a half centuries has been set by Nietzsche. His early meditation on the 'Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' might be seen as one of its rhetorical starting points. From the very onset until its most recent developments, the reference to the lived experience was also a core issue and main concern of phenomenology. Husserl's notion of the 'life-world' (or the *Natural World* in Patočka's words) bears witness to this basic inspiration of phenomenology. The interpretation of the life-world, however, did find its primary setting within the confines of subjectivity. Despite being confident of its validity, Patočka's *Natural World* turns into a document for the dissolution of this subjectivist approach. Subjectivity itself becomes the ultimate *explicandum*.

Keywords Subjectivity • Life-world • Natural world • Phenomenology • Patočka • Nietzsche • Descartes

The title of this essay is a folly. It is all too presumptuous in its playful composition of philosophical fragments and all too playful in dealing with the expectations entailed in the presumptuous wording. The essay's crucial question is indeed that of subjectivity or, if taken more as a philosophical tenet, of subjectivism. It will be tackled eminently in reference to Jan Patočka and his reflections on the problem of the 'Natural World'. Nevertheless, it is in Patočka himself where the whole philosophical tradition of subjectivism, from Descartes to German Idealism to twentieth-century phenomenology, is reworked and reconsidered in its meaning for the question of *who* or *what* it is that is the thinking entity and as such the starting point for all philosophical reflections on 'subjectivity'. The Cartesian differentiation between *cogito* ('I who think') and *quicquid cogitat* ('anything that thinks' or 'whatsoever thinks') will obtain a somewhat altered significance within this quest for the ground of 'subjectivity'.

L. Hagedorn (✉)
Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna, Austria
e-mail: hagedorn@iwm.at

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On Uses and Disadvantages

'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History'[1] is the famous title of Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*. Its rhetorical impact lies very much on the side of the 'Disadvantages', as if saying: 'We would be much happier, were we able to live without history, unhistorically.' The cow, prominently referred to in the very beginning of this writing, is equipped with the enviable ability of immediately forgetting everything so that it has no awareness of history. We humans might want to ask, 'Hey, how come you are so happy?'; and the happy cow is about to answer, 'Simply because I always forget' – but then it forgets this answer as well, and we are still left wondering.

Nonetheless, since humans are not animals, we simply can't forget, but we can – as Nietzsche holds – maybe *learn* how to forget, or better: how to remember the invigorating and useful aspects of history and how to forget its nasty and painful leftovers (Nietzsche speaks of "fractions", which is a telling metaphor).[2] So while rhetorically emphasising the 'disadvantages' of history,[3] Nietzsche's overall message is more differentiated: his writing is about the *right amount* of history, asking how much of history and memory we really need. The eloquent and powerful plea for the *liberation from history* is, on a more sober level of reflection, mitigated by the balanced and unagitated conclusion that "the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture" (Nietzsche 1997b: 63).

Subjectivity and Method

A similar ambiguity is characteristic for how big strands of twentieth-century philosophy have approached the question of subjectivity. While on the one hand the concept of transcendental subjectivity is often criticised as inadequate, on the other hand it remains the central axis for most of modern thought that does not want to 'fall back behind Kant'. Jan Patočka's *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem* (1936) is almost paradigmatic for this (Patočka unpublished). But before

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, first published in 1874. There is a variety of English translations and, accordingly, of titles for this early work by Nietzsche. Some of them also try to emulate the alliteration of the original title, which is the resonant factor in German, with the help of rhyming, e.g. 'On the Use and Abuse [or: Uses and Abuses] of History for Life'. See Nietzsche 1997a.

[2] Cf. "Thus the animal lives *unhistorically*: for it is contained in the present, like a number without any awkward fraction left over" (Nietzsche 1997b: 61). NB in quotations throughout, emphasis is in original, unless otherwise stated.

[3] One is inclined to ask: what else, in a late 19th-century environment of historicism, when confronted with an 'overkill of history', and when, as a classical philologist, forced to deal with the seemingly irrelevant minutiae of one's profession?

speaking about his view on the uses and disadvantages of subjectivity, one should maybe ask whether our comparison of subjectivity to history is in itself a useful approach: if Nietzsche's reflection is concerned with the *right amount* of awareness for history, what then would the transference to subjectivity mean? There probably can't be too much or too little subjectivity as a philosophical stance. Subjectivity is a methodological approach rather than a stimulant; it is about right or wrong instead of finding the appropriate amount and the good measure. Leaning on the Greek word *méthodos* and its reference to 'way' or 'path', it seems adequate to hold that one's reflection is *either* on the right way, the right path, of examination, or not.

However, stating this in the environment of phenomenological philosophy entails certain difficulties: is there a method or methodology of phenomenology? Heidegger, at least, who was of no small influence to Patočka, would consider 'method' as something related to metaphysics and science. Obviously Descartes has a method, famously already in the title of his *Discours de la méthode*[4]; how to rightly conduct one's reason and how to rightly seek truth in science – those are his questions, truly methodological questions, leading to his hyperbolic or methodic doubt (also known as Cartesian doubt) and his efforts to establish new foundations for the house of science and philosophy instead of accepting the shaky old premises.[5] Certainly, to mention but one more example from modern philosophy, the speculative dialectics of Hegel shows a methodology; namely even more than a procedure or a technique, but a self-refection of philosophy, guaranteeing its own functioning and usefulness.

Heidegger's attempt to overcome what he calls 'metaphysics' might therefore stand as an example of the effort to leave behind such reflections about the first, pure and unobstructed ground for the new building. But what does this entail for the problem of method and methodology? In an oft-quoted passage from *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1927) Heidegger famously states: "Phenomenology is the name for the method of ontology, that is, of scientific philosophy. Rightly conceived, phenomenology is the concept of a method" (Heidegger 1988: 20). In this sense, phenomenology itself is a method, and certainly Heidegger also has his own method in bringing philosophy forward to Being itself; that is, bringing Being to view in a free projection. It is a method that he calls "phenomenological construction". But since there is always already a philosophical tradition, a tradition that pervades into even the most radical attempts to begin all over again, "there necessarily belongs to the conceptual interpretation of being and its structures [. . .] a *destruction* – a critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed, are de-constructed down to the sources from which they were drawn" (Heidegger 1988: 20 f). This method of construction and

[4] René Descartes, *Discours de la methode* (1637); see Descartes 1960.

[5] In the very beginning of Part II of his *Discours*, Descartes states: "Thus it is observable that the buildings which a single architect has planned and executed, are generally more elegant and commodious than those which several have attempted to improve, by making old walls serve for purposes for which they were not originally built" (Descartes 2008 [1637]: Part II).

destruction (which became so famous with the postmodern fashion of deconstruction) has a remarkable side effect: it inevitably brings back the question of history. Method is by no means free of history, and history comes back methodologically, namely as deconstruction. Therefore, the reflection on subjectivity as a method is drawn back into the question of history as a tradition that in some way or other (methodologically) influences or contaminates all pure and new beginnings. The question of a right or wrong (in method) is inseparable from that of a higher or smaller dose of tradition and its effects as stimulus or sedative. But this is only one of the difficulties entailed in the comparison.

Uses and Disadvantages for Life

A second difficulty in speaking about the uses and disadvantages of subjectivity has to do with the reflection on what to measure against. So far, this aspect has been carefully evaded, but, as is well known, the full title of Nietzsche's pamphlet is 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for *Life*' (emphasis added). Life is the criterion used to decide what is 'useful' and what is 'disadvantageous'; life is the somewhat magic notion that serves as the ultimate purpose, a notion as shimmering and powerful as it might be undefined and nebulous. Other words and concepts that Nietzsche uses almost synonymously are 'health', certainly, but also rarer references such as "cheerfulness, the good conscience, the joyful deed, confidence in the future", and so on,[6] not all of them necessarily and strictly identical but somewhat setting a line of separation: when is it demanded to feel historically and when unhistorically; how to differentiate between what is useful and what is disadvantageous? The criterion, then, is always dependent on judging how far something serves as a means for the powerful instinct of life or for an intensification of life. The 'sound', the 'healthy' and the 'great' are supposed to grow only on a certain foundation of vitality, a certain being in favour of life, cheerfulness, health, and so on. The prospect at the very end of Nietzsche's article is the claim for a "more robust health and in general for a more natural nature than its predecessors" (Nietzsche 1997a: 121). Certainly, Nietzsche shouldn't be taken too literally here: the "more natural nature", a *contradictio in adiecto*, is at the same time, and by purpose so, as natural as it is unnatural – put differently and relating this idea back to the beginning, human beings do not simply forget: they have to learn how to forget and what to forget. Nietzsche also uses the concept of a 'second nature', which is very much the same intricate idea of a more natural nature. 'Life' and 'nature' should therefore not be taken as essentialist biological concepts, but as dynamic and open for further development.

If, in Nietzsche, 'life' is the benchmark for the right and prosperous amount of history, what could then be the right scale for subjectivism? The title of this paper

[6] To mention just a few that Nietzsche gives in one single sentence (Nietzsche 1997a: 63).

leaves it open, by purpose so and as simple expression of a certain embarrassment: 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of Subjectivism for…' what? - philosophy?, truth?, science? The more one takes subjectivism as a methodology, the more urgent becomes the question of what it provides us with. Is it the firm and stable ground of all knowledge? This would very much still be the Cartesian dream of setting the foundation stones that all future progress in the sciences can rest on. Descartes very much sees it as a struggle against 'confused ideas', so that the task of philosophy is to create order. What was called reality is real no longer; reality has to obey mathematical laws, it has to be understood *sub specie* of the formal mathematical model. Philosophy is here like the pathfinder for the one and only method of true knowledge.

As is known, the philosophical task for Edmund Husserl in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, and similarly for Patočka in his *Natural World*, is a different one: namely, to reconcile the two opposing world views of science and the naive, natural attitude. Philosophy does not any longer try to set science on the right track, but tries to find a way to reintegrate the devaluated natural attitude; that is, the prescientific understanding of the world. Both Husserl and Patočka try to achieve the reconciliation of these opposing views by relating them back to the same and common source: namely, their constitutive generation by transcendental subjectivity. This striving for unity is not only a theoretical question – not for Husserl and, even more so and explicitly so, not for Patočka. The quest for a reintegration of the opposing world views is an *existential* question, and he leaves no doubt about this when stating that "the scientific view can induce a profound change in the very foundations of the life-feeling; man lives in the fundamental apperception of his unfreedom, he feels himself the agent of objective forces, perceives himself not as a person but rather as a thing". With the help of another famous philosophical concept, this reification is then called "self-alienation", finally with an even greater pathetic undertone also "self-abdication". As for the reasons and sources of this self-alienation and self-abdication, Patočka leaves little doubt when saying that it arises "where man directs neither himself nor others from a *personal* standpoint but rather gives himself up to the impulses that carry him" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. I, §2).[7] The existential inspiration and the reference to the Heideggerian concepts of authenticity and resoluteness seem to be obvious. However, there is also another analogy that might not be so instantly obvious but, once detected, becomes quite conspicuous: a search for unity that goes far beyond the unification of scientific and natural world – a quest for enhancement and invigoration that speaks clearly out of the quoted passage with its favouring of active mastering over passive submission. The overcoming of self-alienation and

[7] All references will be given as chapter (Ch.), section (§), because the manuscript is currently unpublished. The Czech original appeared in 1936. It was the first book worldwide that was dedicated to Husserl's topic of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) or, in Patočka's words, the 'Natural World'. Patočka already had access to Husserl's *Crisis* manuscript, which came out in the same year, but incidentally only *after* Patočka had published his thesis. The *Natural World* was reprinted in 1970 and finally edited in Vol. 6 of Patočka's *Collected Works* (see Patočka 2008 [1936]).

self-abdication in Patočka's *Natural World* is not by chance reminiscent of Nietzsche's fight against the "awkward fractions" referred to at the very beginning of his untimely pamphlet.

The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem

The stereotypical understanding of Patočka's habilitation-thesis of 1936 is that it tries to somehow combine the late Husserl with a bit of Heidegger, in the end clearly opting for the more Husserlian solution of transcendental subjectivity.[8] This gives a picture that is not at all wrong, but that is perhaps valid only on a certain level; or to frame it in the language of ice figure skating, this is the compulsory part of Patočka's academic writing (and the fact that the book was meant to serve as thesis for his habilitation should be stressed). But next to the compulsory part, there is obviously a certain freestyle program as well. What does it consist in? First of all, there is Patočka's vigorous interest in the history of philosophy – something that will remain typical for all his writing: the aforementioned concept of construction/destruction clearly shines through his reading of Fichte, Schelling or Hegel.[9] Secondly, there is his persistent occupation with the concrete phenomenality of the world: spatiality, temporality, corporeality, affectivity. Already the combination and mixture of these concepts indicate the mutual supplement of Husserl's and Heidegger's approaches. But they also stand for a descriptive phenomenological method of its own (his 'Phenomenology of Perception', if one wants to make the comparison to Merleau-Ponty's major work). And again, this is something that will remain characteristic also for Patočka's later philosophy.[10] These two approaches – the descriptive–phenomenological one as well as the one related to history and the history of ideas – are significant components of his stand-alone philosophy.

Nevertheless, were one to determine the core issue, the leitmotiv of this freestyle program, it would probably have to be found yet somewhere else. At one point in his *Natural World*, Patočka makes the following remarkable statement (it brings the discussion back to the concepts of self-alienation and self-abdication):

[8] Ludwig Landgrebe's Introduction to the German translation of Patočka's book might serve as a good example of this (cf Landgrebe 1990). Landgrebe clearly points out these inspirations in Patočka's writing and also relates them back to the historical circumstances of that time (Husserl's visit to Prague, Landgrebe's life in exile, their common care for Husserl's *Nachlass*, etc.).

[9] These philosophers are Patočka's most important historical references in the *Natural World*, not Kant or Descartes as in Husserl's *Crisis*. Just this small observation already shows a remarkable difference between their approaches. Patočka's consideration of transcendental subjectivism starts with some of its most preeminent examples in the history of philosophy. The prefiguration of an all-encompassing subjectivity in German Idealism is reworked (de-constructed) with regards to Husserl's phenomenology.

[10] Out of many such phenomenological studies of his, one could mention the lecture series, 'Body, Community, Language, World', which also came out in English (Patočka 1998).

> The fact that even such consciousness of abdication leaves room for a stabbing anxiety [about the finitude of existence] is simply more evidence of the inner conflicts in which human self-alienation becomes entangled. Alienated man finds it difficult to enter into the spirit of his self-prescribed role, or rather, the role prescribed to him by the objectivist view of his essence; life within him flees this graveyard reconciliation, and as he is unable to free himself from his self-apperception, he endeavors at least to turn a blind eye and forget his situation in the thousand distractions so abundantly offered by modern life. (Patočka unpublished: Ch. I, §2)

Keeping in mind that the piece was written with an academic purpose by somebody in his late twenties, one will not be surprised by the compulsory and quite direct reference to Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and finitude. But there are also quite a lot of moments that make this passage 'Patočkian': not just the wording ("stabbing anxiety", "consciousness of abdication", "graveyard reconciliation" – Patočka is often quite unique in coining his own expressions and slight terminological variations); also the combination of philosophical ideas creates an image of its own. Most remarkable in the quoted passage is probably the formulation that "life within him flees" the role prescribed to the modern, self-alienated human being. The background of this description is still the discussion of modern objectivism generated by the scientific world view. "Life within" is said to flee that perspective, maybe in an 'inauthentic' way first, namely towards being distracted; but this first impulse is or should be then overcome by something else. What, then, is the 'authentic' or 'positive' outcome of "life's" striving to flee the "graveyard reconciliation"? His answer is surprising; or, in fact, surprising is the variance between two different reasons given to overcome alienation. The first is, as Patočka says, "the need for philosophy as a unity function for our splintered consciousness". The inspiration provided by Husserl's diagnosis in the *Crisis* and the proclaimed main line of his own writing in the *Natural World* is easy recognisable. Patočka also makes it explicit by adding that the splintered consciousness is "blundering from the naive to the scientific world and back, living out its unfortunate existence in between the two positions". But only in the sentence to follow does he then concede that this, his own description, is "far too tolerant of the grosser tendencies of human nature" because the unity function should be considered more in its "practical significance". Ultimately, placed at the end of the chapter, this second motive to overcome alienation is described in terms of the necessity to find a "suitable ground for the genesis and development of a strong self" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. I, §2). One could hardly imagine a more indicative passage for the leaving behind of the 'official' (compulsory, academic, etc.) approach and the favouring of the 'freestyle program'.

Indeed, the development of the "strong self" can be closely related to the philosophical striving for unity; it is the practical side of the unity function, the awareness that one has stepped over to a new, firm ground and that life is no longer "splintered". But taken in its full consequence, this shift also implies that theoretical life (*bios theoretikos*) becomes immersed in the much broader concept of self-integrity, inner strength or – to use the Nietzschean word – health. Reading Patočka's first book with that hypothesis in mind, it seems to be all-too-obvious:

the main concern of the *Natural World* is not the split between scientific world view and natural attitude (this split, the concern of Husserl's project in the *Crisis*, is only *one* of the manifestations within a much bigger and broader crisis); rather, it is about the implications that this crisis in general has for personal self-awareness and self-integrity.[11] One could describe a certain tendency in both authors with the help of the following pointed observation: whereas Husserl's *Crisis* is really concerned with the rehabilitation of the natural world (the '*Lebenswelt*' in his terminology), Patočka's undertaking in the *Natural World* is in fact all about the crisis of philosophy. Philosophy has lost its capacity to serve as a "unity function"; it is drawn into the existential quest and thereby returns to its beginnings in Socratic questioning.

Crisis and Nihilism

Philosophy is no longer the safeguard against the disparity of world views. For Patočka, philosophy itself is the problem, or philosophy itself poses the problem. The philosopher's transcendental subjectivity is not any longer the constitutive source of the world's unity, but the self in itself becomes a questionable unity. And as concerns the general background for the crisis of philosophy, it is all-too-obvious that it does not merely have to do with the rise of modern sciences. In his *Natural World*, Patočka does not once use the word 'nihilism'; neither does the name Nietzsche show up in the whole book.[12] But such direct references are hardly needed, because it is so obvious that the question being dealt with in the *Natural World* is *the* Nietzschean question: the onslaught of nihilism and the attempt to overcome it. That this is the case becomes clear when Patočka repeatedly refers to the task of creating a meaning or giving a meaning to life. In one passage he characterises his writing as the attempt to follow the "question of the *overall meaning* of life" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. I, §2, "overall meaning" italicised and highlighted by himself), and at another place, in explicit reference to Dostoyevsky,[13] he says that the breaking of the world's unity "threatens modern man in that which is most precious to him: his personality" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. I,

[11] It is not by coincidence that the Socratic motive of the *care for the soul* obtains such a crucial importance for Patočka's later philosophy. Care for the soul is like the practical or existential aspect of what 'philosophy as a unity function' means.

[12] This is quite remarkable, since in many of his articles published either before or after, Patočka indeed has manifold and intense references to Nietzsche, cf. e.g. 'Some Comments on the Mundane and Extra-Mundane Position of Philosophy' (1934) and 'Life in Balance, Life in Amplitude' (1939), both of them in English translation (Patočka 2007a, b, respectively).

[13] It is one of Patočka's main theses in his very last article, 'On Masaryk's Philosophy of Religion' (1977) that Dostoyevsky's literary work is an answer to Nietzsche's question of nihilism. This long article is planned to be published in English translation in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* in 2014. German translation: Patočka 2002.

§4). With such explanations it becomes clear that the 'Crisis of Modern Sciences' is not seen as the source and origin of a general crisis: on the contrary, the falling apart of the natural and the scientific world views is a mere indicator, the epi-phenomenon of a bigger crisis that is characterised by the general loss of meaning. The question of nihilism is naggingly present in Patočka's book but never is it fully and explicitly addressed.

The same holds for another Nietzschean concept which will now bring back the discussion to the main topic of subjectivity. The crisis of the scientific, objectifying world view is, for Patočka, at least in one aspect a very important indicator; namely in that its proclaimed failure proves the necessity to understand the world not as a dead object, but as something that has to be bestowed with meaning. The world is rather:

> a meaning created in an eternally flowing activity whose main modalities will be the theme of our analyses, feeling their way toward the center; thus we can no longer see being as a *fatum* but rather as a law drawn from our innermost core, as a creation which offers a certain space of freedom also to upsurges of new creativity. (Patočka unpublished: Ch. I, §4)

This talk of an "eternally flowing activity", the "innermost core" and "creativity" is quite indicative in itself. But all these concepts do only reveal their full impact, when now – finally – they are related to what can be called 'the magic word behind'. What is the core that they all refer to? Certainly, life! It is impossible to fully enumerate all of Patočka's references to "the uniqueness of life", life's activity, "natural life-feeling", the lived-experience and lived-experiencing (activate the activity), to embodied life, practical life, and so on. In fact, in his book of less than 200 pages there are not only dozens, but several hundreds of references to life.

The Magic Concept of 'Life'

Nietzsche's magic concept, 'life', therefore, finds its fullest acceptance and relevance in Patočka's *Natural World*. What is behind or beneath his reflection on subjectivity is a reflection on life. One can certainly hold that this is not so much of an astonishing result, since it is well known that one of the strongest inspirations for phenomenology in general was certainly the so-called 'philosophy of life' (*Lebensphilosophie*).[14] The immediate interconnection between 'life' and 'phenomenality' rests evidently in experience itself and the activity of experiencing – phenomenology is about the salvation, the preservation, the articulation of lived and lively experience. But even if it might not come as a big surprise to have this close interconnection to life and life's activity in a phenomenologically oriented writing, one can still hold that it rarely ever becomes so obvious, so omnipresent and also so self-explanatory as in the case of Patočka's *Natural World*. The book

[14] This label most often refers to philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Wilhelm Dilthey. Its most important forerunner and source of inspiration, nevertheless, is obviously Nietzsche.

was said to deal with the question of the 'Uses and Disadvantages of Subjectivity' – and the central notion of life will now help us to give the answer to both of these questions: Why is subjectivity useful? Why would it be useful to save the concept of subjectivity? Because subjectivity (transcendental subjectivity) is the safeguard for the 'sense-bestowing', the creative, active, fluent character of life's mental and practical activity. Why, on the other hand, is it necessary to criticise subjectivity? For the very same reason: there is a certain all-too-tight and all-too-technical understanding of subjectivity that might threaten to cut off the diversity and the over-abundance of the lived experience. Why hold fast to the concept of subjectivity, and why overcome, modify, enhance subjectivity? For the very same reason – for the sake of life!

'Life' was the crucial category for Nietzsche's critical assessment of history ('history for the sake of life'); 'life' in Patočka is the central benchmark for the uses and disadvantages of subjectivity ('subjectivity for the sake of life and lively experience').

The disadvantages, the critique of subjectivism, become evident in many instances of Patočka's writing, although this is – so to speak – not the official doctrine. They become evident by the overall argumentation leaning on Heidegger's 'Being-in-the-world': that is, his stressing of the pragmatic character of things encountered in the world (Heidegger's ready-to-hand in contrast to the present-at-hand); also the stressing of the passive, receptive side of experiencing the world, our everyday life and attitudes and activities; and thirdly also the attunement of life that is the 'mood-colouring' of all experiences.[15] But it is clear that Patočka, in many aspects, also wants to go beyond Heidegger. Corporeality or embodiment is probably the best example. Bodily existence, for Patočka, always has a double meaning: it is on the one hand the body that makes all activities of human life possible (body as experiencing instance); but there is also a dependency resulting from that, a dependency that predetermines which possibilities we are to choose (the body as 'thrownness', to use the Heideggerian word).[16] But regardless of how influential Husserl or Heidegger or anybody else was for the more detailed analyses of the *Natural World*, most remarkable is the overall inspiration that seems to be

[15] Cf. the following passage from the *Natural World*: "Moods and 'states' are dynamic: it is part of their essence to be from something and for something; every mood is a mood for a certain activity, be it idleness. The possibility of our activities lies in our moods and 'states' (in 'how we are', or 'how we are doing'). Each and every life is characterized by a scale of moods…" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. III, §1).

[16] In his 'Afterword' to the *Natural World*, written 40 years after the publication of the main text, Patočka refers to the problem of bodily existence like this: "The body and embodiment belong essentially […] to what is revealed, uncovered by the illuminated, disclosed being in its being-in-the-world. […]The body belongs not only to the problem of one's own spatiality but also to the sphere of one's own possibilities. The body is existentially the totality of possibilities that we do not choose but into which we are inserted, those for which we are not free, those *we have to be*." (Patočka unpublished: Afterword [1970], §II). The reformulation of 'thrownness' in terms of corporeality is indicative of his general attempt to take up philosophical impulses of Heidegger, but build them into a phenomenology of concrete phenomena.

behind his critique of subjectivity. The main line was already indicated. It is the endeavour to give life to the subject, and that means: no longer is the subject some abstract instance of perception and consciousness; rather it is supposed to become 'real' life, a being in the world and a concrete being situated in the world.[17] Replace subjectivity with 'the flow of life' or, at least, bring subjectivity back to the rich source of life – the general tendency of this undertaking seems to be clear. How to achieve it? Several aspects have already been mentioned; but what is the basis for it all, or, to use an earlier word, what is Patočka's overall methodological approach? Much of it obviously consists in what could be called a de-constructivist approach: that is, he carefully relates his argumentation to the philosophical tradition and (re-) integrates several elements into a theory of its own. But what does this mean to the concept of subjectivity as such? In short, one could say that the attempt to awaken the subject, to give real life to the subject, leads to a certain decomposition of the subject and its functioning as transcendental subjectivity. There are at least two tendencies in Patočka's early writing that indicate this decomposition of the subject, the change of its character.

Subjectivity, Person, Life

The first tendency is connected to the concept of 'person'. At one point of his *Natural World*, Patočka comes to a formulation that almost sounds like a definition of what 'person' means in his approach: "The pure I is not merely an identical pole; it is at the same time the substratum of our habitualities (convictions, attitudes, habits), and in this respect it can be determined as a *person*" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. II, §7). The reference to "convictions, attitudes, habits" – i.e. the inclusion of the whole cultural, ethical and practical background of human life – is the additional element in contrast to the mere subjectivist understanding. Convictions, attitudes and habits might have to do with values that give a meaning to human existence. Accordingly, some of the main strands of a high-up philosophical concept of the person ('personalism') share ideas with the Christian and/or

[17] Once again, Patočka's choice of words is revealing. Despite officially holding on to the transcendental subject, there is a whole set of concepts entering his discussion that speak a different language: "transcendental life" (appears several times, first appearance: Patočka unpublished: Ch. II, §5); "transcendental field" (appears several times, first appearance: Patočka unpublished: Ch. II, §5 – a prefiguration of the "phenomenal field" that he will speak of in the 1960s); "transcendental preexistence" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. II, §5); maybe the most telling one, also mentioned a few times, "flowing life" (first appearance: Patočka unpublished: Ch. II, §5); then finally a combination of these concepts in the definition "the transcendental field appears as flowing life, presenting itself with the character of apodicticity; its contents include all and every object of our lived-experiencing, all and every being, grasped, of course, as a phenomenon" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. II, §6). Certainly, very similar formulations can be found in Husserl as well. But what, for Husserl, is taking place within the field of transcendental constitution is, in Patočka, coming closer to existential questioning and Socratic care for the soul.

humanistic traditions. Patočka is sometimes not so far from these personalistic views. Nevertheless, his 'ethics' is not one that is strongly value-based, but shows a deeper interest in the very primordial happening of what makes an ethical life at all possible: the original conversion (he often uses the Greek word *metanoia*) to ethics; the 'call of conscience' (to use Heidegger's term) that is not an advice and does not demand a concrete action, but 'awakens' to morality in the sense of being a pre-moral origin of all moral action. However, what Patočka obviously shares with personalistic views is the accentuation of responsibility. Human life is not heteronomous – i.e. determined by nature or society. Being a person, in a certain sense, means to create oneself in and through practical action. The concept of 'person' therefore entails a dynamic structure, it is a dynamisation of the 'subject'. In this sense, a 'person' is *more* than a mere 'subject'. This is also true in relation to what is maybe the most outstanding feature of a personalistic view, namely social relationships. A person is a person only in relation to other people. The constitution and realisation of personhood takes place in community and through dialogue (this, once again, separates more person-related views from mere subjectivist ones). This interpersonal aspect is also strongly present in Patočka,[18] but is not brought to the foreground. More characteristic for him is the basal understanding of what 'person' means in relation to finiteness and corporeality, i.e. the exposure to the world, which nicely speaks out of the following quote: "The subject is always bound to a body, dependent on the givenness of realities outside it, and hence finite; it is a person" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. 2, §6).[19]

If the concept of 'person' in a certain sense is *more* than subjectivity, there is also the tendency of making it *less*. This second reworking of the idea of subjectivity is closely connected to the already mentioned notion of life. "Flowing life", "transcendental life", etc., are heavily brought into discussion as replacements and/or enhancements of subjectivity. 'Life' is less than subjectivity, because it relates to an anonymous, unnamable instance that is not individualised. If taken in an objectified sense, 'life' and 'person' are contrary, conflicting concepts. By definition, 'person' is set against or above 'life', above mere life; it is meant to be more than and different from, for example, animal life. But both concepts come together again, if taken in the subjective sense of an experiencing instance that perceives the world – and not only perceives the world, but *is* in-the-world, acts in the world, etc. What the philosopher Patočka wants to get hold of is the liveliness of experiencing. And how to get it? Precisely by relying on personal, authentic, lively experience. Nevertheless, there remains a certain tension between the almost-equivalent use

[18] In the *Natural World* this is especially formulated as a critique of both Husserl and Heidegger, who, according to Patočka, severely underrate social life.

[19] This quote shows that the characterisation of a 'more' and 'less' than subjectivity shouldn't be taken too literally. It is also not meant that both concepts would exclude one another. On the contrary, both indicate a certain reworking of the concept of subjectivity that might lead to a more refined, dynamised understanding. Patočka's theory of the "three movements of human existence" points into that direction: whereas the first movement is more passive and related to the past ("subjected to. . ."), the third one is active and future-oriented ("make oneself a subject of. . .").

of concepts such as 'person' and 'life'. Once again, language seems to reveal it: not accidentally does Patočka refer to this experiencing also by calling it "transcendental field" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. 2, §6), and not accidentally is this understanding of it clear of all subjective or personal ingredients.[20] If we are to make sense of this terrain or field, we can only think of it as an experiencing that is before or prior to a 'person' in the sense of a free and responsible being. The tension between these two concepts – or better to say between these two accents in the reformulation of subjectivity – is not really solved. But the tension in itself might be significant. It indicates the difficulties in overcoming or enhancing subjectivity and in awakening it to 'life'. The reflection on the uses and disadvantages of subjectivity leads to a certain decomposition or disintegration of the experiencing instance as such ('subjectivity', 'life', 'person' etc.). This decomposition also reverberates in Patočka's reference to the most classical formulation of subjectivism in Descartes. What is it that thinks?

Quicquid Cogitat

In his *Principia Philosophiae*, Descartes makes the following statement: "*Is qui cogitat, non potest non existere dum cogitat*" (Descartes 1644: Part I, §49); in translation, "he who thinks must exist while he thinks"[21]; or as it could also be translated, "it is impossible that he who thinks does not exist while thinking". Descartes calls this statement a *notio communis*, which is, in his own definition, "an eternal truth having its seat in our mind, [...] a common notion or axiom" (Descartes 1879: Part I, §49). The better known and shorter formulation of it is: "*quicquid cogitat, est*" – "whatever thinks, exists". The remarkable difference to the first formulation consists in the fact that Descartes, instead of the personal *is qui* ("he who"), uses the neuter: *quicquid* ("whatever", not "whoever"). This common notion or axiom is prior to the famous Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum*. Descartes says so explicitly in his conversation with Burman: "*Ante hac conclusionem: cogito, ergo sum, sciri potest illa major: quicquid cogitat, est...*" (Descartes 1903: 47) – "before the inference from 'am thinking' to 'I exist', the premise 'whatever thinks exists' can be known, because it is prior to the inference, which depends on it." And Descartes convincingly continues to explain this priority:

> [...] this premise comes first – because it is always implicitly there and taken for granted. But it doesn't follow that I am always expressly and explicitly aware of its coming first, or that I know it before conducting the inference. I'm attending only to what I experience within myself – e.g. that 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'. I don't pay the same attention to the general thought that 'Whatever thinks exists'.[22]

[20] This is already a prefiguration of his later "a-subjective" phenomenology and the notion of a "phenomenal field".

[21] Very similar formulation in (Descartes 1644: Part I, §10); the quoted English translation is (Descartes 1879).

[22] Quoted from the online translation edited by J. Bennett (Descartes 2010–2015: 1f).

One of the most famous sentences in the history of philosophy, explained by the author himself; but here attention should be paid to only one thing: namely, how Descartes explains on the one hand the priority of the general, impersonal statement and on the other the exact opposite – the necessary priority of the first person singular. *Quicquid cogitat* comes first in logical order; it is an eternal truth, a *notio communis*. The *Cogito*, on the other hand, is the one that comes first and has to come first in the order of experience.

In his *Natural World*, Patočka takes up exactly this differentiation of Descartes. Still in the initial chapters of his undertaking he says: "The *cogito* has an exceptional priority over all other ideas: it is the first idea, implying existence, so to say, a generator of certainty about what is. [. . .] The first *certainty* is not *quicquid cogitat, est* but rather *cogito, ergo sum*" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. 2, §1). This short summary of the above-outlined discussion in Descartes rightly indicates why the *cogito* is the starting point of Descartes's philosophy: because it is the generator of certainty! But it is very interesting to see how Patočka then goes on to further explain this idea:

> The *cogito* as an idea must be distinguished from the *cogito* as a **living** certainty. [. . .] Descartes himself distinguishes the *cogito cogitans*, *source* of all certainty, from the *cogito cogitatum*, which is an *objectified result* of the former. It is the *cogito cogitans* that contains the guarantee of its objects, so to say the source of **living water** from which they draw their **life**; and in the *cogito, ergo sum*, this **lifegiving** consists evidently in the identity of the *cogito cogitans* with the *cogito cogitatum*. (Patočka unpublished: Ch. 2, §1, italics in translation, my bolding)

The references to life, lifegiving, living water, have been highlighted here by purpose, since they indicate a remarkable change: whereas Descartes seeks for certainty, for a firm ground of his reflection, which he means to find in the *cogito* as the famous *fundamentum inconcussum* of his meditations, Patočka, also speaking about certainty first, qualified as "living certainty", then translates the *cogito cogitans* (the non-objectified side of the *cogito* and the one he refers to as a phenomenologist) into a 'lifegiving' instance and into the 'source of living water from which all objects draw their life'. The question of certainty is dissolved into the bigger and more important (at least bigger and more important to Patočka) question of assuring the liveliness of experience, the fullness of life and its transmission into philosophical reflection.

For Descartes, the certainty is guaranteed by the identity of the *cogito cogitans* and the *cogito cogitatum*. The *cogito cogitans* reflects on its own activity in the past and thereby assures indubitable knowledge. But, as Patočka asks, "what does the *cogito cogitans* mean in its unreflectedness? This question did not interest Descartes, it finds no answer in his work; in Descartes, the *cogito* remains unanalyzed" (Patočka unpublished: Ch. 2, §1). It is not all-too-daring to assume that his own philosophical intentions clearly speak out of this critique. Shouldn't the liveliness of experience be favoured over its proclaimed certainty?

Patočka does not explicitly relate this to the question of *who* or (better) *what* the 'subject' is. The outlined references to 'person' and 'life' indicate a certain direction of his approach. But in reference especially to his later a-subjective

phenomenology, it would be interesting to ask for the character of this experiencing instance as such. Descartes's formulation of a *quicquid cogitat* might serve as an indicator for this somewhat-altered concept of subjectivity. It was Nietzsche who greatly formulated an anti-Cartesian shift back from the 'Ego' to an 'It' or '*Quicquid*':

> I shall never tire of emphasizing a small terse fact [. . .] – namely, that a thought comes when 'it' wishes, and not when 'I' wish, so that it is a *falsification* of the facts of the case to say that the subject 'I' is the condition of the predicate 'think.' It thinks: but that this 'it' is precisely the famous old 'ego' is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an 'immediate certainty.' After all, one has even gone too far with this 'it thinks' – even the 'it' contains an *interpretation* of the process, and does not belong to the process itself. [. . .] perhaps some day we shall accustom ourselves [. . .] to get along without the little [it] (which is all that is left of the honest little old ego). (Nietzsche 1886: §17)

The explosive element entailed in this comment is a systematic undermining of the concept of the subject as such. It seems that exactly the will to be truthful to experience, the will to make experience 'lively', the will to awaken the subject to 'life', forces philosophy to rely more on the experience as such, on lived experience, without necessarily presupposing a clear-cut concept of the experiencer or the experiencing instance itself. Descartes's '*quicquid*' is a great expression for this in that it relates the experiencing to some 'it', some yet-undefined instance that is also crucial for Patočka's a-subjective phenomenology. For Nietzsche, it is a mere habit and convention of language that forces us to think of thinking as an activity to which a subject as a cause of that activity *must* be thought. The idea of a unified and with-itself-identical Ego collapses. For Patočka, the result of his writing on the *Natural World* is a similar one: his reflection on the uses and disadvantages of subjectivity releases an inner dynamic that finally tries to overcome the whole concept of subjectivity – and to give life to the subject.

Summary

'Life' is the magic word for decisive currents of modern philosophy. Much of the tone for this debate over the last one and a half centuries has been set by Nietzsche. His early meditation on the 'Uses and Disadvantages of History *for Life*' might be seen as one of its rhetorical starting points. From the very onset until its most recent developments, the reference to the lived experience was also a core issue and main concern of phenomenology. Husserl's notion of the 'life-world' (or the *Natural World* in Patočka's words) bears witness to this basic inspiration of phenomenology. The interpretation of the life-world, however, did find its primary setting within the confines of subjectivity. Despite being confident of its validity, Patočka's *Natural World* turns into a document for the dissolution of this subjectivist approach. Subjectivity itself becomes the ultimate *explicandum*.

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