

# What New Can We Learn from the *Philosophical Journals* of Jan Patočka?

Jan Patočka. *Filosofické deníky*. Nepublikované záznamy z let 1946–1950. Edited by Ivan Chvatík. Vol. 19, *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2022, 593 pp.

Jan Patočka's extensive oeuvre contains eleven notebooks filled with randomly dated notes from 1946 to 1950. These documents originate from the so-called Strahov legacy, specifically manuscripts discovered in the 1990s in the Strahov library. This legacy includes a collection of Patočka's manuscripts from the 1930s and 1940s. The 1980s were mainly devoted to the history of philosophy, the philosophy of history, and phenomenological reflections on the concept of the world. In 1971, Patočka deposited them in this renowned library in Prague without disclosing this information to anyone (Karfík 2000/2001).

The post-war years were characterised by Patočka's focus on teaching Greek philosophy at Charles University in Prague. The reopening of the university provided a propitious opportunity to revisit the origins of philosophy. Besides, it is worth noting that dealing with ancient thought was safer than investigating phenomenology, which is often viewed as bourgeois philosophy. Thus, he delivered lectures on the Presocratics (1945–1946), Socrates (1946–1947), Plato (1947–1949), and finally on Aristotle (1949), which were later published as monographs during the brief period of the thaw. In 1950, Patočka delivered a single lecture on Hegel's—*Phenomenology of Spirit*. The same year, he was expelled from Charles University in Prague and began working at the Masaryk Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.

It is presumed that Patočka began penning his *journals* in 1946, albeit only notebook IV contains the recorded dates 23.11.1946–29.5.1947. Several themes can be distinguished in Patočka's extensive work (nearly 600 pages). Firstly: phenomenology, which he never spoke about at the university; in fact, he regretfully stated that no one knew about phenomenology in Czechoslovakia. The *Journals* contain many remarks and analyses on the concept of the world and its ontological dimensions, the positioning of life attitudes, reflections on the concept of time, and the dimensions of proximity, home, environment or strangeness (Patočka 2014). Prominent and influential philosophers of the era, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, and Edmund Husserl, as well as lesser-known figures from the Czech Republic like Gaston Berger and Raymond Polin, emerge within this context. Those acquainted with Patočka's oeuvre may be puzzled by the substantial presence of Sartre. It is worth recalling that his *magnum opus*, *L'être et le néant*, was published several years ago (1943), and Existentialism constituted an intriguing and significant effort to reconsider phenomenological dilemmas. Finally, Marxist philosophers were also interested in existentialism, but as Patočka stated, they did not have much to say about it (Zouhar, Pavlincová and Gabriel 2013).

Secondly, it is worth noting the presence of the Greeks, which can be directly traced back to the lectures delivered at the university during that time. Moreover, Greek philosophy gradually became an integral element in shaping Patočka's philosophical undertakings, particularly exemplified by his formulation of the concept of "negative Platonism" in the 1950s.

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk is also evidently present in the *Journals*. This is not particularly surprising. In 1946, Patočka wrote valuable texts on the thoughts of the first president of Czechoslovakia (Patočka 1991). The central concept of the dissertations was that, in modern times, we need Masaryk's philosophy, albeit it necessitates a fresh perspective, with a specific focus on his analysis of the contemporary human who feels lost in the new civilisation. Echoes of these texts, of this crisis mood (which links Masaryk and the late Husserl), can also be found in the *Journals*.

Fourthly, notes from books. There is a considerable amount of these. Patočka was not only devoted to his conception of phenomenology but was also a great erudite. He was fluent in several languages, and his research was highly recognised. It is not even conceivable to reference the authors' names and dissertation titles in the *Journals* (Cibulka 1997, 234).

In this review, I will focus on the fragments where Patočka outlines the socio-political circumstances that had a growing impact on the Czech populace, both as a scholar and, more importantly, as a philosopher.

I will try to piece together the few fragments scattered throughout the *Journals*.

A crucial commentary must accompany these remarks because these are well-known facts, and we know how significant the year 1948 was in the history of Czechoslovakia. Following the conclusion of the Second World War, Czechoslovakia was reactivated, and its government comprised not only communists but also pre-war social democratic and people's politicians under the leadership of President Edvard Beneš. From 20–25 February 1948, a communist coup d'état occurred, resulting in the complete seizure of power by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Two months later, the president declined to sign the new communist constitution and relinquished his position after the parliamentary elections. In June 1948, Klement Gottwald became president of Czechoslovakia (Blecha 1997, 97–105).

The Czech philosopher was cognizant of the fact that he was living in a world that had never previously existed. In a world that can be described as an “in-between,” a reality that is only just organising itself into a unified whole. As a result, individuals lose the crucial detachment from the world and are compelled to become part of a global organisation. Such distrust places us at a disadvantage as we fail to comprehend our times. We lack clarity in subtle metaphysical, social, political or moral distinctions. However, we are making a detrimental decision by removing the solution from the jurisdiction of a political party (Patočka 2022, 252). According to Patočka, socialism is a doctrine of people deprived of freedom in the psychological sense, which they compensate with physical power. This is only possible in a modern industrialised society, where humans are no longer *animal metaphysicum* but *homo faber* (Patočka 2022, 291). In socialism, the practical aspect, or one might even say the technical aspect, is somewhat devoid of solidarity. However, most people do not want to ask questions but instead seek “satisfaction.” Patočka sadly observes that people are content with so little, such as seeing the USSR, being fed with compliments, and hopeful promises. However, when one sees individuals subjected to that which is immediate and insignificant, one endeavours to transcend, as Nietzsche had already discerned—“Das Allzumenschliche ist das Unmenschliche.” “Where people are not hungry, there is no future” (Patočka 2022, 253). A student of Husserl raises the question of whether the moral condition of the USSR surpasses that of the opposing party in the conflict. Does hunger give us moral superiority? As Patočka notes elsewhere:

We must, however, not forget that hunger alone does not confer the capacity for clairvoyance. There are two types of blindness: short-sightedness and

distorted vision. The satiated is short-sighted. Mirage entices those who crave effort. (Patočka 2022, 253)

Collectivism is valuable and essential if it elevates the individual above himself; it is bad and dangerous as soon as it replaces this function with the glorification of its objectified qualities and characteristics, as soon as it ceases to fulfil its spiritual role. If one intends to seek validation solely from the collective, it will lead them astray. Patočka notes that socialism is both a false collectivism and a false individualism. Collectivism is only justified if it serves goals beyond overcoming false individualism and is inclusive. Furthermore, this is also the essence of the Liberal Revolution: a revolution against the concept of impeding the spread of human perspectives, primarily defining individuals in terms of social organisation.

Towards the end of *the Journal*, we find this dramatic entry: “Communism is an overarching monologue that silences and suppresses everyone, creating an impression of total emptiness and exclusion” (Patočka 2022, 489). Patočka is no longer of this world, never indeed was, yet it was around 1950 that he bore witness to the full horror of communism, comprehended its transcendence beyond mere power struggles, and exposed the metaphysical illusion of “total humanism.” Gottwald and Stalin still clung firmly to their power; the activities of the engineers of human souls were gaining strength and momentum. Patočka seems helpless, but “this is not a reason to give up completely. The most important thing is not to give up. Non-submission, as a general rule, constitutes a central moral principle” (Patočka 2022, 253).

Patočka, in seclusion with his students, particularly his philosophy, alongside Husserl, Masaryk, and the Greeks, solidified his belief in a shared necessity and collective human suffering. This belief reached its pinnacle in 1977 when he assumed the role of spokesperson and, to some extent, the moral compass for Charter 77. The *Journals* are perhaps the first modest yet significant vestige of a dissident path that would fully manifest during the 1960s.

We also find some brilliant fragments in the *Journals*. Patočka writes about French existentialism as the philosophical reflection of disillusioned communists on their disillusionment with communism. With regards to the Czechs (he devotes scant attention in the *Journal* to reflections on his small nation), he notes:

The Czech Republic’s smallness and narrowness ... could be attributed to the fact that we are the most introverted nation in Europe. Every other nation has

at least some connection to the sea. We have always been somewhat isolated. Perhaps our xenophilia could be interpreted as a form of hypercompensation. It is better than feeling inferior. (Patočka 2022, 296)

Regarding emigration, a matter he had the right to contemplate:

What is emigration? The inconceivability of being at home, which is where our love resides. Perhaps it is possible to emigrate externally to stay internally at home. However, I find that one equals the other. (Patočka 2022, 300)

Furthermore, an exceptional phenomenological piece delves into the analogy between music and pain, expounding on how pain, similar to music, encompasses distinct elements such as tone, timbre, and intensity. In the experience of pain, such as when one listens to music, we enter a state of ecstatic dissolution, obliterating the subject-object distinction (Patočka 2022, 71).

*The Philosophical Journal* was published in the famous critical edition of Jan Patočka's *Collected Writings* as its nineteenth volume. It was prepared for publication by the founder and long-time head of the Jan Patočka Archive, Ivan Chavatík. In turn, the Prague-based publishing house OIKOY-MENH, a patron of the project from the outset, contributed its renowned minimalist graphics to the work, which resembles our Library of Philosophical Classics.

The *Philosophical Journals* are an indispensable source for researchers studying the works of the Czech philosopher. They shed a broader light on the research Patočka was conducting at the time, encompassing the lifeworld concept, Greek philosophy, and Masaryk's thought. These notes will serve as a valuable resource for the connoisseur of the Czech philosopher, akin to "marginal notations." However, they do not alter the overall interpretation and reception of the Czech phenomenologist.

Conversely, other readers may make little use of the notes from the Journals. They are overwhelming in their fragmentation and, to say the least, a somewhat tedious "phenomenological work."

In my opinion, a valuable diary must possess two main qualities: firstly, it should provide insights into the author's inner life and how they relate to their research (as a diary can also function as a memoir); secondly, it should serve as a testimony to the historical context, in this case, the revolutionary period of Czechoslovakia's history. One need not immediately draw comparisons with a revered tradition, such as Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals*

or Gabriel Marcel's more contemporary *Metaphysical Journal*. Patočka's diaries lack personal comments, references to academic activities, traces of the author's cultural life, and any mention of Prague, its streets, and cafés. Finally, there are no references to the world's greatest tragedy—the Second World War. Just philosophy. Echoing the phenomenologist Hedwig Conrad-Martius, one can only notice the obsession with philosophy.

However, the author's strong focus on self-observation of natural idea development caused Jan Patočka's *Philosophical Journals* to fall short of meeting the two objectives mentioned above. Therefore, one can utilise a phrase famous in review circles—exclusively for enthusiasts for the Czech philosopher.

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