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NEGATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

“Nothing” is the force
That renovates the world”¹
~Emily Dickinson

In *Donner la mort*, Jacques Derrida presents Jan Patočka as a philosopher of responsibility. In his readings, especially in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida is looking for the heretical (or un-thought) meaning of Patočka’s essays on the philosophy of history. Heresy as the un-thought, or the un-thought as heresy is what seems to seduce Derrida to Patočka’s *Heretical Essays*. Derrida attributes the heretical meaning, that is to say, the meaning of the heretical in these essays to Patočka’s discovery of the knot of “orgiastic irresponsibility” living as a secret within responsibility. Orgiastic irresponsibility appears here as the secret force of responsibility. Responsibility awakens by means of incorporating, repressing and disciplining this “orgiastic irresponsibility,” that is to say, this secret. Derrida listens to the question of responsibility presented in the *Heretical Essays* with Heideggerian ears – or, to put it more correctly, with ears accustomed to interpreting Heidegger in a certain way. These ears listen to Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as a treatise about the awakening of the “becoming oneself,” that is, about the becoming of the subject as *Dasein*, understood as the birth of freedom, authenticity and the proper – in short, as the birth of existential responsibility. Derrida reads and listens to Patočka as a modulation of this understanding of the existential analytic of *Being of Time*, a modulation that may “correct” improprieties of Heidegger’s presumed search for the proper and the authentic. He reads the secret of responsibility in Patočka as the two-sided story of the genesis of egological subjectivity through the incorporation, repression and discipline of “orgiastic irresponsibility,” the expansion of diurnal responsibility through the contraction of nocturnal irresponsibility. Derrida reads and listens to Patočka as a philosopher of transcendental subjectivity, a philosopher to whom the awakening of responsibility can only be understood as a certain way of self-relation, namely, as reflective self-relation, as self-reflection in which self-transcendence takes place. The awakening of responsibility can therefore only be understood here as the awakening of philosophical consciousness. Responsibility is presented not only as a matter for philosophical discussion but as the core of the philosophical attitude. Derrida will insist that there is no responsibility without dissidence and an inventive rupture with tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rules and doctrines, following the path of tradition in which philosophy assumes for itself a dissident responsibility towards history. A lot can be said about the way Derrida presents and interprets Patočka’s heretical essays and a lot, too, about the way in which he assumes the secret meaning of re-

¹ Emily Dickinson. *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, (Boston/Toronto: Little Brown, 1960) nr 1563, p. 650.

sponsibility in his readings of Patočka. I will leave these questions for another occasion and move away in the sense of putting into question the underlying conviction of Derrida's readings that the question of responsibility in Patočka is connected to "the very idea of a genesis or a history of egological subjectivity."² The purpose of the following notes is to indicate that for Patočka responsibility is neither a concept, nor responsibility for and of a concept. Responsibility is rather a task, the task of transcending subjectivity as self-relation and philosophy as self-reflection. Responsibility appears then as the very task of "a-subjective phenomenology."³ It appears as negative responsibility; or more precisely formulated, it appears as responsibility *for* the negative.

A-subjective phenomenology takes as its point of departure a critique of Husserl's subjective phenomenology. The *alpha privativum* in the expression "a-subjective" has several meanings. One of them – which can be considered the propaedeutic meaning – is that of a denegation of Husserl's subjective phenomenology. It is a denegation rather than a negation insofar as the hyphen in the term regards and sustains a tension with subjective phenomenology, with subjectivity understood as self-relation and self-reflection. Transcendental subjectivity cannot be overcome from a philosophical position as if it could be eliminated or sublimated through philosophical ordinances or dictates. Overcoming subjectivity is, for Patočka as much as for Heidegger, a historical task; and, as such, it becomes a question at the point at which epochal and existential history can no longer be separated from one another.

Patočka's critique of Husserl's subjective phenomenology can be summarized in his critique of the way the latter grasps "appearing as such" and hence the very meaning of phenomenology. Patočka considers that the most radical discovery of Husserl's phenomenology was already the idea of a "transcendental a-subjective phenomenology," understood as the discovery of the "field of the self-showing" (*sich-Zeigen*)⁴, which Husserl discovers but also loses. The discovery that Husserl made was the field of showing itself from itself in the different modes in which something appears for someone, that is, in experience. This discovery was not about a new field of objects and objectivity unknown before, but rather about the field in which the difference between the showing itself and what is shown appears. It is the field of a difference that Heidegger conceived of and elaborated as "ontological difference" between Being and beings, and that Patočka will rephrase as the "phenomenological difference" between the appearing as such and appearances. Husserl discovered the field of self-showing, "the phenomenal sphere." To quote Patočka: "Husserl discovered the phenomenal sphere, the sphere of appearances in their appearing – something that the tradition had never taken before into view when reconverting it into the structures of appearances in their particularity. In an enterprise close to Descartes', Husserl aims to put

² Jacques Derrida. *Donner la mort in l'Ethique du don* (Paris: Métailié/ Transitions, 1992), p. 37, eng. transl. *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 19.

³ Jan Patočka. *Papiers phénoménologiques*, (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1995) p. 288.

⁴Jan Patočka "Epoche et reduction" in *Qu'est-ce que la phenomenologie?* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1988) p. 257 ff.

this sphere into relief and to secure it methodologically.”⁵ However, in expressing this discovery in terms of “self-appearing” and “self-showing, (*sich-Zeigen*), Husserl somehow lost sight of his own and most foundational discovery. As Patočka insists, although “the (phenomenological) intention views the appearing as such – the phenomenal sphere – it (this intention) remained circumscribed insofar as [Husserl] used terms coming from the sphere of the subjective.”⁶ The terms of the subjective sphere are not only the “ego” and “consciousness” or “self-consciousness,” but the very pronoun “self” active in the expressive “it-self.” Placing the accent on the *self* of self-appearing, Husserl remained – according to Patočka – a prisoner of the chains of the “self.” This is the core of Patočka’s critique of the subjectivism of Husserl’s phenomenology.⁷ Remaining too “subjectivistic,” Husserl both misses the “as such” of the appearing and the transformation of the very understanding of human existence that derives from a phenomenology of “appearing as such.” Patočka will make a similar critique of Heidegger’s understanding of the field of “appearing as such” as “comprehension of being” from out the ontological difference, by considering that when Heidegger insists on “Being as such,” he also remains enchained in an understanding of Being as what is “itself.” By being overly non-subjectivistic, Heidegger also falls into the chains of selfhood of Being itself. The central critical point is the “enigma” of the reflexive-pronoun, of the “self” in the expression “it-self,” active in both Husserl’s and Heidegger’s ways of expressing the “as such” of appearing, the former in terms of *self-showing* (*sich-Zeigen*) and the latter as *Being itself* (*Sein selbst*). Phrased as “self-showing,” “what shows itself from itself,” “the appearing as such” loses its intransitivity, its fundamental meaning as “gift” – “*Es gibt*,” “*il y a*.” It is a gift without generosity, that is, not only without “the farce of giving and receiving”⁸ (as Samuel Beckett expressed it), but beyond the place from which the miserly distinction between giving and receiving can be made. Phrased as “self-showing,” the appearing “as such” becomes subjected to the identity of a self, to a meaning of being as what is itself according to itself, *to auto kath’auto*. Awareness of identity, the categorical act in which the identity of the “itself” is experienced in the “transparency of its opacity,”⁹ exposes the ambiguity of the reflexive pronoun “itself” that operates in the expression “showing itself from itself” and aims to grasp the field of the appearing as such, that is, the phenomenality of the phenomenon. In doing so, Husserl’s and to a certain extent Heidegger’s phenomenology both betrayed phenomenology.

In *Reflections on Europe*, Patočka affirms that “Husserl’s project is grounded on the idea of the *self-responsibility of knowledge*,” that the knowledge acquired through intellectual life is grounded in self-understanding, rooted in

⁵ “Le subjectivisme de la phénoménologie husserlienne et la possibilité d’une phénoménologie “a-subjective, in *Qu’est-ce que la phénoménologie?* op. cit., p. 206.

⁶ Ibid. p. 207

⁷ See particularly Jan Patočka, “Le subjectivisme de la phénoménologie husserlienne et la possibilité d’une phénoménologie “a-subjective” and “Le subjectivisme de la phénoménologie husserlienne et l’exigence d’une phénoménologie a-subjective” in *Qu’est-ce que la phénoménologie ?* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1988), p. 189-243.

⁸ Samuel Beckett. “Masson” in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, (London: John Calder, 1999), p. 112

⁹ Renaud Barbaras, *Le désir et la distance. Introduction à une phénoménologie de la perception*, (Paris: Vrin, 1999), p. 82

self-relation.”¹⁰ Only from within the covering up of the phenomenological discovery of the appearing as such, as it is reconverted into self-appearing, can philosophy be defined as self-knowledge based on self-relation and in this sense as self-responsibility. Patočka will describe this reconversion, or betrayal of phenomenology in terms of the “will to self-responsibility.” He says: “the will to self-responsibility would have no meaning if there did not also exist the possibility of irresponsibility that manifests itself alongside the purely technical conception of science.”¹¹ Philosophy is, for Husserl, self-responsibility in the sense that it makes evident the irresponsibility of the modern meaning of science as irresponsibility towards self-appearing, that is, towards the phenomenal sphere. Philosophical self-responsibility arises for Husserl from self-knowledge, self-inquiry and self-relation, in which the meaning of what appears appears in the way in which *self-appearing* and *the appearing of the self* as personal-embodied existences relate to each other. In this Husserlian sense, philosophical self-responsibility or philosophy as self-responsibility is responsibility for “Being in it-self,” for “things in themselves” insofar as one becomes responsible for “being one-self.” It means committing oneself in return to “Being in itself,” to “things in themselves” in the sense that only in being oneself does it become possible to give an account of “being in itself,” of “things in themselves.” Self-responsibility here takes up the etymological sense of responsibility, an expression derived from *respondere* as a process of reference and self-reference, in which one renders the reckoning, makes an account and lays the grounds for one’s own being in Being itself.

Patočka’s a-subjective phenomenology can be grasped in the way he brings self-appearing back to its original phrase, which reads: the “appearing as such.” The phenomenological task assumed by Patočka is the one of bringing back phenomenology to the mode, to the “as such,” *“als solche”* of the appearing. Indeed, phenomenology is thought as a return, a re-phrasing of “self-appearing” into “appearing as such,” where the “self” becomes re-expressed as the “as such,” into the modality of being. “As such,” the appearing appears negatively. The appearing as such, in its mode, that is, in its *event*, appears as *non-appearance*, as *non-being*, *non-thingness*, *non-selfhood* or *non-selfness*. It does not appear “as” appearance, in that it has no appearance. It appears “as such.” This means that it appears without appearing in everything that appears. But insofar as the appearing as such is neither something that appears in itself – an appearance – nor something other than the appearance, than things, than something in “itself;” because the appearing “as such” is being and non-being at once, then its mode, its “as such” is neither identity nor difference, and even less indifference. Its modus is rather one of non-alterity, of *non-aliud*, an expression that Patočka borrows from the title of a treatise by Nicolas of Cusa.¹² Understood in this manner, which for

¹⁰ Jan Patočka. “Reflexion sur l’Europe” in *Liberté et sacrifice. Écrits politiques* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1990), p. 188.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Patočka translated Cusa’s *De li non aliud* in Czech but the translation appeared under the name of J. Sokol, cf. J. Patočka – P. Floss, Mikuláš Kusánský, Praha 2011, s. 123-243 (= P. Floss, Mikuláš Kusánský, *Zivot a dílo* Praha 1977, p. 205-340). For a very inspiring discussion about the world as the non aliud in Patočka, see Filip Karfik. “Die Welt als das non aliud”, in *Unendlichwerden durch die Endlichkeit. Eine Lektüre der Philosophie Patočkas*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008, 55-68.

Patočka means experienced in this way, the *appearing as such* is in tension with everything that *appears in itself*, that is, as appearance. Carrying still further the distinction between “as such” and “in itself,” it becomes possible to uncover another meaning of the “subjective,” one that is no longer that of the “self-responsible rational subject” grounded in self-reflection and self-relation. “As such,” the appearing does not appear, either for a constituted subject or for itself. It appears a-subjectively.

Patočka described this a-subjective meaning of the “subjective” as “a much simpler meaning.” It is the meaning of the subjective as “ontological movement” or “movement of existence,” as the simple meaning of the gerundive *is-being*. It is the meaning of a *sum* that exposes itself as what the Latin *sum* cannot fully express – the simple *existing* in its gerundive form. This other meaning of the subjective is “a-subjective” because it exposes the subjective as existence in its gerundive existing, as existing *in* existence, as moving in the movement of life, and not simply as existence *tout court*; it exposes the subjective as exposed and ek-static in the very movement of existence. Patočka’s theory of the movements of existence is a reformulation of Heidegger’s understanding of Being and of human existence as ek-static temporality, re-conceived in terms of movement in the event of its moving. Existence is ek-static in that it is existence in its gerundive existing, movement in the moving of the movements of life. Patočka will describe the is-moving of the movements of existence as “*energeia ateles*,” activity without direction, possibility for possibilities, neither self-relation nor relation to something other than itself; thus, here, the “self” and the “other” are nothing but moving movements. In relation to different philosophies of existence,¹³ Patočka’s theory of the three movements of human existence reformulates the meaning of existence in showing how existence is ontological movement, in the sense that it only exists ‘existingly,’ gerundively, so to speak. Ontological movement, being as movement, says movement in the *meanwhile* of its moving, says the event of moving. In its meanwhile-ness, in the event of its moving, movement is both always already moving and still to begin to move. In its fundamental gerundive form, that is, in the moving, movement is past, present and future at once without dissolving these differential ecstasies into the void of a permanent, non-moving eternity.

The three movements of human existence describe analytically what is to be understood as intertwined. Patočka affirms the analogy with Heidegger’s description of the ek-static temporality of Being and of *Dasein*.¹⁴ It would be mistaken to read the three movements as progression or edification of states in life. The linearity of the movements presented by Patočka corresponds to the linearity of time in talking about time. How, then, to say the contemporaneity of temporal ecstasies in words without impoverishing them into linearity and successiveness? Moreover, which word would be able to say the time that is needed to say time? Patočka describes the three movements in the following way. The first movement is the one of acceptance, of throwing down roots and anchoring existence in the earth of the world. The “coming

¹³ cf. Patočka’s critique of existentialism in his “Zweifel am Existentialismus”, In Jan Patočka, *Ausgewählte Schriften: Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz*, ed. K. Nellen, J. Němec and I. Šrubař, Stuttgart (Klett-Cotta) 1991, str. 509–514, přel. P. Sacher (v. 1991/2).

¹⁴ See also Paul Ricoeur’s Preface to the *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Op.cit.

to a home" that constitutes the main dimension of this first movement, describes more than anything else a being with others. Community and society appear here as the true meaning of "home;" home, thus, is essentially "protection."¹⁵ Human existence is movement and not a thing in movement: it is existing and only therefore can it search for "home," for "rest" and "protection." It is, from the beginning, displaced and un-placed. The old metaphors of human existence as journey and trip, as existence in exile from God, show the being already in movement of existence, shows it as moving-together-with-others, that is to say, as e-motion and co(m)-motion. The second movement corresponds to the attempt to reproduce existence for the sake of remaining in existence. It is the movement that moves against movement: life becomes the means of survival, a kind of dispersive and fragmentary movement, in which movement flies from movement. It is the movement of escaping from movement, a will to remain existent and not to continue the moving movement of existing. It is the movement of encapsulation in a "self," in a time, in a space, the movement towards reification and instrumentalization of existence, of an ontic separation between self and others. The third movement is the movement that shakes movement itself. It is the shaking movement where every home and ground, every selfhood and otherness, every determination loses ground. Human existence discovers itself here as existing in the gerundive. Movement moving towards non-movement, movement fleeing from movement, movement shaking movement: this is a possible description of the three movements from out the gerundive modus of movement, that is, from out the moving of movement.

The transparency that emerges in the third movement is the transparency of the *gerundive existing* as moving ground and therefore as what has no ground, no cause, no "why." The grammatical expression "gerundive", *gerundivus modus*,¹⁶ comes from the verb *gero*, meaning to carry, to bear and has several derivations such as gesture and gestation, (having similar connotations to the German *gebären*). It unfolds a semantic of *the possible as what is actual as possibility* and not as actualized possibility. The carrying and bearing is itself moving and unstable, as in gestation, and not the solidity and stability of a soil or ground. The distinction between *moving ground* and *solid ground* describes the distinction between *a-subjective existing* and *subjective existence*. In its gerundive form, that is from a grammatical point of view, 'existing' is a verb form that expresses the meanwhile-ness of an action as its ground; it says the impossibility of separating the before from the after, the here from the there. It says the "nudity of existence," as Patočka explains, quoting Paul Valéry, who writes of "Life entirely nude, life regarding itself clearly, having no other substance than life itself and neither a further ground than the clairvoyance of the living being."¹⁷ The groundlessness of

¹⁵ In Portuguese, there is a beautiful word for protection, meaning of a piece of cloth that warms, a sweater or scarf, which is *agasalho*. This word, used already by Camões, has a Celtic-German origin, coming from *gesell*, *Gesellschaft*.

¹⁶ Derived by grammarians from the passive future participle *gerundus*: "the mode of an action to be accomplished.

¹⁷ Jan Patočka. "La position de la philosophie dans et en dehors du monde" in *Liberté et Sacrifice*, op. cit., p. 21. For the original quote by Paul Valéry: "La vie toute nue, quand elle se regard clairement", "qui n'a d'autre substance que la vie elle-même et d'autre cause seconde que la clair-voyance du vivant", see Paul Valéry, "L'âme et la danse" in *Oeuvres*, (Paris. Gallimard, La Pléiade, vol II, 1960), p. 167

the gerundive meanwhile-ness of existing as moving movement defines the 'such' of 'appearing as such.'

The third movement is the moving in which human existence discovers itself as existing in the gerundive mode; that is, in groundlessness, pure transcendence, as the freedom of negativity. But this is possible not only because existence is shaken, but also because the points of reference of and for existence – the very “ground” upon which existence moves suffers a seismic upheaval. The third movement, the movement of losing every stability of a “self,” either one’s own or another’s, is the movement in which the relation between man and Being, human existence and the totality of life, human movements in the moving of the appearing as such appears in its “nudity” insofar as here, both movement and its grounds are shaken. In this shaking, both movement and ground appear as groundlessness. What becomes evident here is that neither the objective nor the subjective meanings of movement can ground the groundlessness of moving as such, the gerundive event of moving. It is the third movement that shows how the two other movements are not “stages” in self-development but dimensions of this gerundiveness – so to speak – of the is-moving.

In *Notes on the Pre-history of the Science of Movement: World, Earth, Heaven and the Movement of Human Life*,¹⁸ Patočka describes how objective determinations of movement pre-suppose – without acknowledging – ontological movement, that is, appearing as moving. Instead of opposing objective accounts of movement to a phenomenological first person, embodied-perspective experience of movement, Patočka shows the point at both descriptions encounter and disengage. What gathers both positions together is the fact that both share the evidence of movement as bodily experience. But what both seem to forget is how movement is bodily not by being “self-motional,” auto-kinetic but by being movement on a ground, and therefore a relation to an archi-point of reference, the earth. However, in contrast to Husserl’s discussions of the archi-earth that “does not move,” the ground of all grounds, the archi-ground of earth *is* moving. For Patočka, the earth does move and moves all the time. It moves insofar as it nourishes, cares for and protects life. The earth moves because it is generative, gerundive and therefore a moving ground. In this sense, “earth’s horizontal reigns over the vertical of life;”¹⁹ and therefore “we are modifications and parts of earth.”²⁰ However, Patočka also shows that the earth is not the only point of reference; it is the nearest and most accessible point of reference but not the only one. Thus, there is still heaven and the realm of light and obscurity, stars and constellations. Indeed, it is *in-between* earth and heaven that the movements of human existence discover their ground and reference. We feel, here, the resonance of Kant’s words in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, which Patočka refers to in *Negative Platonism*, saying that the “critical situation” of philosophical life is that of a life “having no point of reference or attachment, nei-

¹⁸ Jan Patočka. “Notes sur la pré-histoire de la science du mouvement: le monde., la terre, le ciel et le mouvement de la vie humaine” , transl. Erika Abrams, in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), p. 3-13.

¹⁹ Jan Patočka. “Notes sur la pré-histoire de la science du mouvement: le monde., la terre, le ciel et le mouvement de la vie humaine” , transl. Erika Abrams, in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, op. cit.

²⁰ Ibidem

ther in heaven nor in the earth.”²¹ For Patočka this does not mean however that the only point of reference and attachment would be reason itself, as Kant’s argument suggests. It means, quite differently, that the in-between of earth and heaven emerges here as the groundless ground of every movement. In-between earth and heaven, human existence is oscillation not between places but “in itself.” The “self” is in itself “oscillation,” a *seism*.

As the movement in which the “self” loses itself and not merely as a state of *self-lessness*, the third movement makes evident not only human existence as existing, but also discovers that earth and heaven are moving firmaments and hence that they themselves have a “*trans*,” for they are a moving beyond. As Patočka observes: “there is nothing that could propitiate for existence a definitive reference and rootedness, a final goal, an always valuable “because.”²² The third moment is the avalanche of earth and heaven within existence, the avalanche in which the existing of existence becomes transparent, apparent throughout every plan of existence.²³ Here the “nudity” of existence emerges in its own nudity as much as earth appears as the “giver of every “where” and heaven as the “giver of every when.”²⁴ This trembling, shaking or seismic upheaval of earth and heaven shakes not only existence but what renders different ways of existing separated existences. Shaken, here, is the strangeness of the concept of otherness, the absoluteness of this impression of otherness as something constituted in itself in confrontation with a selfhood in itself. This impression of absolute strangeness, at the basis of Husserl’s concept of intersubjectivity can only be left behind, according to Patočka, through a trembling of earth and heaven in which the movement of existence that separated common existing in separated existences receives another orientation, the orientation from and towards a listening to the gerundive form of existing, to the *without grounds for existing as the only ground of existence*. In this experience, existence discovers itself as dis-oriented, unstable – a vertigo of uprootedness.²⁵

If the entire project of Husserl’s phenomenology is grounded on the idea of “self-responsibility,” as referred to before, and if “responsibility” is pronounced in the whole history of Western philosophy as another expression for self-reflection grounded on self-relation, either in the sense of subjective or inter-subjective existence, what can be said of “responsibility” from out of

²¹ Jan Patočka, “Le Platonisme négatif” in *Liberté et Sacrifice*, op. cit., p. 97.

²² Jan Patočka. “Notes sur la pré-histoire de la science du mouvement: le monde., la terre, le ciel et le mouvement de la vie humaine” , transl. Erika Abrams, in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, op. cit..

²³ Patočka gives some literary examples of this, so to speak cosmic avalanche in a text called “What is existence?” Here he discusses, if only briefly, Faulkner’s novel *Wild Palms*, Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faust* and Dostoievskij’s *The Idiot*. see “Qu’est-ce que l’existence?” in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, op. cit, p. 243-265.

²⁴ Jan Patočka. “Notes sur la pré-histoire de la science du mouvement: le monde., la terre, le ciel et le mouvement de la vie humaine” , transl. Erika Abrams, in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l’existence humaine*, op. cit. p. 7.

²⁵ See Patočka’s fragment published as Annexe to “L’espace et sa problématique” in *Qu’est-ce que la phénoménologie?*, op. cit., 303-316. Here Patočka shows quite clearly that as ontological movement, human existence is not spatial for it is always situated in the own body and the body in places, but for it is rather than situated oriented resp. disoriented. The main determination of space is discussed here in terms of orientation rather than of positions.

an a-subjective existing? In other words: what to say about responsibility when the ground of human existence appears as nothing but existing in its gerundive event, that is, as moving ground, as un-grounding and loss of grounds? And furthermore, how is it possible to conceive philosophical life when the ground of existence appears as existing as such, that is, existing without grounds?

Spiritual life, "life in amplitude" and "life in problematicity," e.g. philosophical life, is life capable of *finding* unity without having stable and solid ground: this is Patočka's claim. It is not defined as life in the search for harmony and for solid grounds. It is life capable of finding unity in existing as such, that is, in the groundlessness of its gerundive way of being: "life (in its) possible unity without firm grounds is nevertheless capable of overcoming absolute negativity, nihilism, and negative skepticism."²⁶ Philosophical life as life in amplitude and not in harmony – spiritual life and not merely intellectual life – is life capable of *finding* unity in the absence of solid grounds and not life grounded on solidity. Patočka does not say life as it is capable of grounding unity but rather as it is a *finding* of unity *in* groundlessness. A first meaning of a-subjective responsibility can be formulated, then, as responsibility for the possibility of finding unity in the gerundive groundlessness of existing. This responsibility can no longer be described as affirmative responsibility in the sense of a responsibility that affirms a firm ground for the autonomy of a theoretical and a practical subject. It is a negative responsibility, not in the sense that the subject denies or withdraws from responsibility in letting the self-movement of reality be. It is negative responsibility in the sense that it is responsibility for the possibility of finding unity in groundlessness. *It is responsibility for the possibility of responsibility and in this sense a responsibility for the negative.*

Patočka connected this responsibility of the possibility of responsibility with the experience of sacrifice, which in its Czech and German expressions refers to the offering gesture rather than the victimization of "the sacrificed." The offering is related to an opening for receiving, namely within one's earthly existence, the presence of the night and of the orgiastic, as the naked presence of a generating loss. The general meaning of sacrifice is, for Patočka, the paradoxical idea of a "gain through a voluntary loss."²⁷ Far from a concept of sacrifice as an act of substitution or transference, where potential conflicts can be controlled by means of the sacrifice of a surrogate victim, Patočka defines sacrifice as pushing negativity to its extreme limits. Here, sacrifice means holding out, bearing the pain and suffering of this negativity until it breaks through into a positive dimension. Sacrifice is not understood in its mythical and religious meaning, as a sacred-violent practice where the hierarchical difference between divinity and humanity is experienced and ritualized. When taken to be pushing negativity to its extreme limits, and establishing a positive new order, such sacrifice refers to a metamorphosis within Being and existence whereby the difference between Being and beings appears as a real transformative force. He introduces a distinction between authentic and inauthentic sacrifice. In inauthentic sacrifice, one life is sacrificed

²⁶ *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l'existence humaine*, op. cit. p. 253.

²⁷ Jan Patočka, "The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger," in Jan Patočka, *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, ed. and transl. E. Kohák (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 336.

for the sake of another. In this sense, it is a sacrifice that does not take leave of beings. Authentic sacrifice, on the contrary, is sacrifice for the sake of the totality of life itself, a sacrifice on the way toward Being, which can, therefore, happen only and necessarily through distancing oneself from beings in a radical departure. Patočka's views on the essence of sacrifice are very close to George Bataille's insofar as he assumes the fundamental force of sacrifice to be the real differentiation of the being of man from the being of things. As Bataille asserted, the principle of sacrifice is destruction, but not extermination. At stake in sacrifice is the destruction of thinghood in the victim,²⁸ the return to "immanent intimacy" with the groundless ground of life.²⁹ While extermination, when taken in the sense of in-human catastrophes, aims to transform the human into a thing and to displace the human into a realm of total utility (e.g. in extermination camps, various forms of slavery, and human-made devastation) sacrifices destroy and eradicate such an identification between humanity and thinghood. The concrete experience of being able to sacrifice oneself, of letting oneself be sacrificed, points to the active passivity implicated in sacrifice as well as, according to Patočka, to the *concrete* experience of difference between Being and beings. For Patočka, sacrifice is only possible where an ontological difference is *concretely* experienced, where the difference between Being and beings becomes real. This is why he determines the essence of sacrifice from out of the experience of self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice is not simply a means for something else. Self-sacrifice is in itself a profound force of differentiation. This is why Patočka affirms that "the simple fact of speaking of sacrifice points to an understanding of Being totally different from that implemented in the era of technology."³⁰ There are differences between Being as beings, and beings as resource and disposals (*Bestand*). He insists that self-sacrifice is one of the dominant experiences of the present day, while at the same time, technical understanding tends to eliminate the possibilities for understanding the ontological meaning of sacrifice. In a world where the difference between Being and beings is being constantly eradicated, insofar as it acknowledges nothing but beings understood as resources, functions, and disposals, the ontic difference between the being of man and the being of things tends to disappear. In self-sacrifice, however, both the ontic difference between the being of man and the being of things (a substantial meaning of beings) and the ontological difference between Being and beings breaks through as a *concrete difference* and hence as a concrete possibility of transforming existence.

This is what is at stake in concrete experiences of exile, which Patočka doesn't really discuss, but opens up for a further meditation when he deals with the question of *dissidence*. The self-sacrifice described in dissident existence should be understood from out of the possibility of finding unity in groundlessness. The third movement shows the gerundive and groundless existing as a dissident movement, in the very etymological sense of the word, namely as *dis-sidere*, which means to un-settle not merely positions and situations but orientations and feelings, in so far as they are also a dissenting. Patočka discusses the birth of the "consciousness of responsibility" recalling Socrates' famous phrase: "it is better to suffer injustice than to commit injus-

²⁸ Georges BATAILLE, *Théorie de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 58-59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁰ Jan Patočka, "The Dangers of Technicization ...," *op. cit.*, p. 337.

tice.³¹ He equates the “consciousness of responsibility” with a “refusal of privileges”³² and “the interior signification of extreme sacrifice.” Extreme sacrifice means sacrificing for no-thing, breaking down the logic of the use and abuse of sacrifice – in this regard he is very close to Georges Bataille. Dis-sidence describes the possibility of finding unity in disorientation and uprootedness. A dis-sident is one who is settled in a hyphen, insofar as he/she is no longer settled in a former orientation but is not yet settled in a new one. A dis-sident is a life that is re-moved from a place before, yet never arriving at a place that lies before. It is a life moved otherwise, emotionally transformed, moved in another orientation rather than in a new orientation. It is life in exile discovering life as exile. A-subjective responsibility is responsibility for the negative, in the sense that it is *responsive* and *corresponsive* to this possibility of finding unity in groundlessness. In this sense, responsibility is a kind of re-conducting oneself to the nudity of existence, to its “without reason” in order to be oriented by ontological dis-orientation. This becomes very concrete in experiences of exile, both dissident and dissenting, where the subjective is attuned untimely to the gerundive existing, with the “as such” rather than with the “in itself.” Indeed, the despair and quest for “subjectivity,” so acute in experiences of exile – who I am? I am no longer the same, I will never become another – does not show evidence of the self but exactly the contrary, namely, the groundlessness of the self. Patočka left some notes for a phenomenology of life after death,³³ where we can find some inspiring fragments for an understanding of what I am proposing to call “a-subjective negative responsibility” as a way to think with Patočka the question of responsibility. Showing that living being is indeed always a life after the death of others, living existence is not only co-existent with other living beings but also with no longer living beings; if living existence is co-existence in that there is always possibility of reciprocity, of being-with, co-existentiality with beings that are no longer living – that is, with the dead – is co-existentiality without reciprocity; a-subjective and negative responsibility is responsibility for being with and for being without; indeed, it is responsibility for being with the without and for being without a with. A-subjective negative responsibility is responsive and co-response to the being-with-the without and without the with.

Considering a-subjective existence as shaken existence, attuned to the gerundive existing – with the “as such” of existing and not with “in itself” – an existence experienced on the edge in dissident and exilic situations, and in the awareness of living existence as life after the death of others, philosophical existence is existence existing from out the negative force of the idea. The negative force of the idea is a force of “dis-objectivation” and of “dis-realization”, from which “all our capacities to fight against subjugation to “reality tout court” arise.³⁴ The idea is negative in the sense that it dis-realizes reality, dis-objectifies objectivity, opening a tear or a rip, a *chorismos* within, reality, within existence. The negative force of the idea is *chorismatic* and not *charismatic*. What it opens, what it tears apart, is the “tacit pres-

³¹ Plato. *Gorgias*. eipon egó pou en tois émprósthén to adikéin tou adikeisthai ká-kion einai (473a- 475e)

³² Jan Patočka. “L’idéologie et la vie dans l’idée” in *Liberté et sacrifice*, op. cit., p. 47.

³³ Jan Patočka. “phenomenologie de la vie après la mort” in *Papiers phénoménologiques* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1995)

³⁴ see Jan Patočka. “L’idéologie et la vie dans l’idée” et “Platonisme négatif” in *Liberté et sacrifice*, op. cit.

ence," as Patočka says, of the non-being of being, of the non-sensible of the sensible, of the unapparent way the appearing appears. In its negative, chorismatic force, the idea evidenciates the "mystery of evidence." Dis-realizing and dis-objectifying reality, the idea transcends the real. The idea is not transcendent in relation to reality, but it makes evident the non-being of the movement of being, that is, that the movement of being cannot be grasped as beings are grasped. Understood in this sense, the idea is neither object nor concept, overcoming every being, whether objective or subjective. It is the modus in which totality is given; totality is given *in* not being given as either objective or subjective. The negative and *chorismatic* force of the idea in human existence is the "mirror" of the unapparent modus of the appearing as such. In his notes towards a phenomenology of the appearing as such, Patočka will prefer to describe the human movement of existence as a "mirror" rather than as an image of the negative modus in which the appearing appears as such, withdrawing itself in what appears.³⁵ In the mirror of the gerundive groundless existing coming to the edge in human existence, the a-subjective structure of the appearing as such "appears." Experienced as the freedom of negativity, philosophical life is responsive correspondence to the appearing as such, to the modus of the appearing as appearing unapparently and hence negatively in everything that appears. As responsive correspondence to the negative modus of the appearing, philosophy is negative responsibility. It is responsibility for negativity. In "What is phenomenology?," where philosophical life is described as a "force of negativity," the force of the *epokhé*, e.g. of detaching from thingness towards non-thingness, Patočka will rephrase responsibility as *Über-Antwortung*, literally "over-responsibility" (instead of over-determination), "remise" in Erika Abrams' French translation, a giving back. *Über-Antwortung*, over-responsibility means here a saying back towards, a response to gerundive existing that is already its own echo – something like a listening to the groundless ground of existing. Formed in analogy to *Über-setzung*, translation, *Über-antwortung* could be understood as the translation of responsibility into listening response and correspondence to gerundive existence.

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³⁵ Jan Patočka. *Vom Erscheinen als solchen. Texte aus dem Nachlaß* (Friedburg: Karl Alber, 2000)