From a "Life in the Idea" to a "Life in Truth"

Patočka and Havel on Truth and Politics

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Abstract:
This article discusses the relationship between Jan Patočka's and Václav Havel's political writings. By specifically focusing on Patočka's concepts a "life in the idea" and a "life in problematicity" and Havel's notion of a "life in truth", it seeks to draw out the differences and similarities between their respective understandings of the relationship between truth and politics. The paper argues that Havel reinterpreted Patočka's ideas in a way, which in the final analysis diverged from Patočka's original intentions. Finally, the article argues that Havel's, in many ways productive, reinterpretation gives rise to a highly problematic conception of ideology and politics since the "pre-political" form of politics that Havel envisions ultimately tends to naturalize both truth and politics.

Keywords: Jan Patočka, Václav Havel, truth, politics, problematicity, negativity

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Václav Havel's seminal essay "The Power of the Powerless", from 1978, was dedicated to the memory of Jan Patočka, who had passed away under tragic circumstances the previous year. The fact that Havel dedicates his essay, and his most famous and important essay at that, to Patočka is, of course, not a coincidence. In a number of later articles and interviews, Havel time and again emphasised Patočka's importance, both for himself, on a personal and intellectual level, and for Charter 77.

Havel was first acquainted with Patočka through the so-called underground seminars that Patočka led in various apartments in Prague during the early 1970s. It was also Havel who, together with Jiří Němec, suggested Patočka as the third spokesperson for the Charter, and who convinced him to

accept the position.[1] In a later interview, Havel notes that they were in need of a "worthy complement" to Jiří Hájek, the first spokesperson of the movement and the foreign secretary in Alexander Dubček's former government, who did not come from communist circles and who could, as Havel puts it, impart a "moral dimension" to the Charter.[2] Judging from the texts that Patočka wrote in his capacity as spokesperson, it is clear that he would do precisely this. In a time of heightened instrumentalisation, Patočka writes in the essay "The Obligation to Resist Injustice" – written and published shortly after the publication of the Charter – and in a time where the state appears as a "magazine of force that has all other force, both physical and spiritual, at its disposal", what is needed is something that breaks with the hegemonic technical and instrumental rationality; what is needed is a new form of morality, which is "not only tactical and situational but absolute".[3] A new morality, in short, that the people of Czechoslovakia, and its government, would be bound by, since a state cannot function "without a moral foundation, without convictions that do not depend upon customs, circumstances or expected advantages", regardless of how technologically advanced it may be.[4] These lines are clearly in keeping with Havel's and Němec's expectations, but they are also true to the original formulations in the Charter and its original protest, namely, that the regime of Czechoslovakia was obliged to follow the statutes of the Helsinki Declaration, which it had signed in 1975 and which, as its seventh point or "basket", included "Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief". Patočka's statements and articles on the Charter thus helped to strengthen the moral position on which the movement was based, as did his own reputed moral authority.[5] In fact, if we are to believe Havel, almost all

1 At this point in time, Patočka had already signed the first petition of the Charter, which condemned the illegal arrest of the psychedelic rock bands Plastic People of the Universe and DG 307 – two bands that stood accused of having "disturbed the order". Not only did Patočka sign this petition but he also wrote an article addressing the issue. See Patočka, J. "K záležitostem Plastic People of the Universe a DG 307". *Sebrané spisy XII – Češi I*. Prague, Oikoymenh 2006.

2 Havel, V. *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvížďala*, trans. Paul Wilson. New York, Knopf 1990, p. 135.

3 Patočka, J. "The Obligation to Resist Injustice", trans. Erazim Kohák, in *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1989, p. 340.

4 Ibid., p. 341.

5 Patočka was widely respected and regarded as a person with high moral standards, at least in intellectual and artistic circles in Prague. This is something that many intellectuals bore witness to at the time and that can be indexed by way of Ludvik Vaculik's literary diary *Český snář* (*A Czech Dreambook*). In one passage, Vaculik describes how he goes to visit his friend Jan Vladislav. Every time Vaculik is there, Vladislav's wife invites him to dinner, and each time that Vaculik hesitates she reminds him that "Professor Patočka was sometimes wont to eat at their

of the work pursued by the Charter after Patočka's untimely death "was in harmony with or was directly based upon his ideas".[6]

However, Patočka's influence on Havel was not limited to their shared work within Charter 77. Patočka also exerted a philosophical influence on Havel, something that manifests itself in "The Power of the Powerless", as well as in other essays.[7] Even though Patočka at times employs the expression "a life in truth", it is not a central concept in his work. Instead, he speaks of "life in the idea" and of "life in problematicity", concepts that Havel in turn seems to have reinterpreted as a life in truth (the dedication to Patočka in the beginning of the essay, together with Havel's comments elsewhere, also seems to suggest that Patočka himself was, in many ways, emblematic of a life in truth and served as Havel's implicit model). This notwithstanding, there are some crucial differences between Patočka's and Havel's respective understanding of what a life in the idea or a life in truth would amount to. These differences are not only conceptual in nature, but also concern the philosophical *and* political content of said concepts, as well as the relation between truth and politics.[8]

For Havel, a life in truth has clear humanistic undertones. The ideology of the post-totalitarian Czechoslovakian regime is a threat to human identity as such, since the "life in truth", Havel writes, is what gives human nature its identity. In a society where the very semblance of truth has been eradicated, the possibility of creating one's own identity is lost as well. At the heart of Havel's argument, we can thus locate the familiar antinomy between identity and alienation, between the proper, authentic, essential and – to speak in Havel's terms – "true" existence of man, and the alienated, inauthentic, inessential and false existence that is represented by ideological phraseology. As Havel himself puts it, "individuals can be alienated from themselves

table," whereupon Vaculik feels morally obliged to accept the invitation: "In Patočka's place, albeit lacking his breeding and intellectual depth, I end up eating things I do not even like, because by then I must." See Vaculík, L., *A Czech Dreambook*, trans. Gerald Turner. Prague, Karolinum Press 2019, p. 120.

6 Havel, V., "O smyslu Charty 77", in *Spisy*. Prague, Torst 1999, p. 668.

7 Patočka's influence can, in both an implicit and explicit sense, be discerned in almost all of the essays that Havel wrote during the 1970s and the early 1980s. However, apart from "The Power of the Powerless", two essays stand out in this respect: "Politics and Conscience" and "Stories and Totalitarianism". Both have been published in English in Havel, V., *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, ed. Paul Wilson. London, Faber and Faber 1992.

8 Even though this article only addresses the relation between truth and politics in Havel's and Patočka's respective writings, it is important to note that the issue has wider ramifications in the history of Czech philosophy. A more exhaustive investigation would, for example, have to take the writings of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Emanuel Rádl and Ladislav Hejdánek into account. However, this falls outside the scope of this article.

only because there is something in them to alienate", and this something, the authentic existence of man, is man's life in truth.[9] When the greengrocer finally takes down his sign, he thus rediscovers his own identity. The protest of the "dissident" (whether he or she is a greengrocer, a writer or a philosopher), returns, as Havel puts it, "the individual to his or her essential self" (*vrací člověka k sobě samému*).[10] Hidden within the essence of man there is therefore always a "predisposition to truth", a predisposition that can be repressed and distorted by the illusory veils of ideology but which can never be fully eradicated, since such an eradication would imply nothing less than the death of the individual. It is for these very reasons that Havel can claim that the political protest of the greengrocer, and of the Chartists, is existential, moral and "pre-political" in nature and not political in the ordinary sense of the word.[11] It is not a protest stemming from a political party, nor from a political opposition, but one that is born from within the hidden predisposition to truth in human existence as such.

In the texts that Patočka wrote for the Charter, he also makes use of a humanistic discourse. He calls for an absolute morality that ultimately rests on the inalienable moral value of man. The purpose of morality, he writes in one passage, "is to assure not the functioning of society, but the humanity of humans".[12] This unmistakable humanism can also be found in some of Patočka's earlier texts. However, in his later philosophical texts (texts that paradoxically coincide with his more humanistic political interventions in the Charter) one finds an adamant critique of every essentialist notion of man, be it in the form of human nature or subjectivity, something that culminates in his so-called a-subjective phenomenology and that also inflects his understanding of politics.

The question of how one is to understand the many tensions between Patočka's philosophical writings and his engagement in the Charter, between his a-subjective phenomenology and the humanism of his political interventions, is something that has occupied scholars for some time now, but this is neither the time nor the place to enter into that debate.[13] Instead, I will limit myself to a discussion of Patočka's understanding of the central concepts in

9 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless", trans. Paul Wilson. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 32, 2018. No. 2, p. 369.

10 Ibid., p. 368.

11 Here it is important to note that Havel's insistence that the Chartists did not constitute a political opposition or were political in any sense of the word – something that other signatories of the Charter expressed as well – has to be understood, at least in part, against the background of the fact that all forms of political opposition were strictly forbidden in Czechoslovakia.

12 Patočka, J., "The Obligation to Resist Injustice", p. 341.

13 For an in-depth analysis of the relation between Patočka's philosophical, and politico-philosophical, thought and the texts he wrote in his capacity as spokesperson for Charter 77, see

Havel's essay, more specifically the notion of a life in truth and its antithesis, ideology, and on how Patočka's understanding of politics differs from the "pre-political" form of politics that Havel envisions in his essay. I will, in other words, try to trace in what way Havel's reinterpretation of some of the key concepts in Patočka's thought diverges from Patočka's understanding of both philosophy and politics. Finally, I will point to some of the problems to which Havel's (in many ways productive) reinterpretation of Patočka gives rise.

A life in the negativity of the idea

I will begin by turning my attention to some of Patočka's early texts from the 1940s and 1950s. The first of these is a short essay entitled "Ideology and Life in the Idea", from 1946.[14] The main purpose of this essay is to distinguish philosophy, which Patočka here calls a "life in the idea", from ideology. Ideology, Patočka writes, "although it engages, conceptually grasps, and binds us" is something that "seizes Man externally".[15] Ideology is a force, Patočka contends, and a force that seizes man from without by presenting him with the false promise of a secure principle and foundation that would lend his finite existence a stability that it, in and of itself, lacks. However, ideology thereby also reduces man to a force among others, and a minor force at that, at least in comparison with the overall aim of the ideology in question. The will, freedom and activity of man thus only receives its significance and meaning from the aim of the ideology. Man is a mere means for the aim and goal dictated by ideology, and a means that can be used or abused in any possible way. Whoever does not fit in, Patočka writes, "is dealt with as a detrimental, useless force – and is necessarily ruthlessly neutralized".[16] Patočka then goes on to delineate what philosophy, and a "life in the idea", would imply, and how it is distinguished from ideology:

> An idea is something distinct from this [ideology]: an idea must be embodied, and this embodiment in life concerns our innermost personal core and can never be indifferent towards this inner core. An idea appeals to us, not so that we put ourselves "at the service of the Idea", but rather to be in the Idea, to exist in the Idea.[17]

Čapek, J., "Le devoir de l'homme envers lui-même – Patočka, Kant et la Charte 77". *Tumultes*, 32–33, 2009.

14 Patočka, J., "Ideology and Life in the Idea", trans. Eric Manton, in *Living in Problematicity*. Prague, Oikoymenh 2007.

15 Ibid., p. 43.

16 Ibid., p. 47.

17 Ibid., p. 43.

Whereas an ideology seizes man from without in such a way that man can never fully realise him- or herself within it (since it never truly corresponds to one's personal ideals and aspirations), an idea permeates human existence from within, and is something by way of which man can realise his own existence, or his "inner core", as Patočka calls it here. While an ideology encompasses the individual as a force among other forces (other individuals, a class or a collective), the idea has more of a personal meaning: it addresses me and my own existence in and of itself. Ideologies thus generalise human existence, whereas the idea singularises us and forces us to transcend our existence for the sake of *our* existence.

In this short essay, Patočka does not really delve into the details of what philosophy beyond this (admittedly vague) description would imply but is more focused on the question of ideology. (The article was, to a large extent, formulated as a response to the ideologies that permeated the preceding decades, i.e. fascism and communism.)

However, he does provide one example of a life in the idea, namely, the example of Socrates:

> Ideology, as a practiced theory, cannot alone wrench itself out of the limits of the logic of theory, a logic that looks upon its object from the exterior. Conversely, the logic of the Idea has the peculiarity that it is not merely the "contemplation of things", but rather an identification with the Idea. We find such logic in its classical form in Socrates, who contemplates what is good, with the result that he does not state the Good (on the contrary, a definition simply stating what the Good is somehow continuously eludes his contemplation), but that he becomes good – the Good is established in life and thought themselves.[18]

The idea, for example the idea of the good, is thus something that we – following the traditional logic of Platonic thought – strive towards, an idea that forces us to transcend the limitations of our individual existence in such a way that our very aspiration towards the good is instantiated in our life – making us, just as Socrates, into good and virtuous citizens. However, in this early essay Patočka does not really analyse how we are to understand the nature of ideas. Instead, the essay ends with this insistence that the idea has to be instantiated or embodied. The text is also permeated by a form of essentialism and humanism, which Patočka would later renounce. He will, for example, speak about "the Idea of man" as something that remains when all

18 Ibid., p. 47.

ideologies have faltered, and notes that this idea "remains essentially continuously the same" through all historical and societal changes.[19] This idea of man, is, first and foremost, an idea of freedom, according to Patočka, and even though he will later criticise humanism, at least philosophically, he will never recant the idea of freedom, but will rather attempt to conceptualise freedom in way that transcends the confines of subjectivity.[20]

Patočka continues these reflections in a later text, from 1953, entitled "Negative Platonism", but whereas the earlier essay is marked by a certain uncritical humanism, Patočka now tries to develop an understanding of the "life in the idea" that explicitly excludes any form of humanism, and which instead points towards his a-subjective phenomenology.[21] In this essay, Patočka proposes what he calls "a nonmetaphysical interpretation of Plato".[22] What he turns his attention to is the experience of freedom and its role and importance in philosophical thought. Patočka also understands the Platonic theory of ideas as an expression of freedom. The experience of freedom, Patočka writes, is "always an experience of the whole, one pertaining to a global meaning" and Socrates' dialectic "was intended precisely to show that no sense object, no factual experience, can either pose or answer this question [i.e. the question of the whole of existence]".[23] In distinction to positivism and empiricism (which are the main targets of Patočka's critique in this essay), true philosophical thought – and here the reference to the phenomenological understanding of the world as the "horizon of all horizons" is unmistakable – concerns itself with the whole, i.e. with that which transcends the given, and which in turn imparts meaning to the given. This negative experience is something that Plato had recognised, according to Patočka, but that to a large extent has been overshadowed by the history of metaphysics,

19 Ibid.

20 The question as to why Patočka gradually adopted a more critical perspective on humanism, and on the category of subjectivity as such, is difficult to answer in any clear-cut way. However, it is important to remember that Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" was published in 1947, that is, the year after Patočka published his essay, and that Heidegger's interventions had huge ramifications for the continued work within the field of existential phenomenology, as well as for Patočka's later work.

21 Patočka, J., "Negative Platonism", trans. Erazim Kohák, in *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*. For an analysis of the emergence of negative Platonism in Patočka's thought, and of its continued importance in his later work, see Hejdánek, L., "Nothingness and Responsibility: The Problem of 'Negative Platonism' in Patočka's Philosophy", in *La responsibilité/Responsibility*, ed. Petr Horák and Josef Zumr. Prague, Institut de philosophie de l'Academie tchécoslovaque des Sciences 1992; and Cauly, O., "Patočka, un platonicien sans l'être – Sur le platonisme négatif", in *Jan Patočka – Phénoménologie asubjective et existence*, ed. Renaud Barbaras. Paris, Vrin 2011.

22 Patočka, J., "Negative Platonism", p. 197.

23 Ibid., p. 193.

a history by and through which this negative experience was replaced with a "positive" transcendent object (god, nature, man, etc.).

On a more conceptual level, this experience manifests itself through the Platonic conception of *chorismos*, the gap or divide separating the sensible world from the world of ideas. However, the *chorismos*, Patočka adds, should not, as is often the case, be understood as a division separating something from something else, or as the division between two regions of objects. Instead, it originally implied, Patočka notes, "a separateness without a second object realm":[24]

> *Chorismos* is a separateness, a distinctness *an sich*, an absolute one, for itself. It does not entail the secret of another continent, somewhere beyond a separating ocean. Rather, its mystery must be read out of the *chorismos* itself, found purely within it. In other words, the mystery of the *chorismos* is like the experience of freedom, an experience of a distance with respect to real things, of a meaning independent of the objective and the sensory which we reach by inverting the original, 'natural' orientation of life, an experience of a rebirth, of a second birth, intrinsic to all spiritual life, familiar to the religious, to the initiates of the arts, and, not least, to philosophers.[25]

It is also this understanding of Plato that warrants the notion of a *negative* Platonism. Platonic ideas do not, Patočka claims, constitute a supersensible realm of transcendent objects; instead, these ideas are a form of non-being that makes it possible for philosophers to de-realise or de-objectify the world, that forces the reflection of the philosopher to transcend that which is given. If we return to Patočka's earlier notion of a "life in the idea" we can thus see how these reflections on a negative Platonism alter his earlier understanding of what a life dedicated to thought, and truth, implies. By now, it is clear that a life in the idea differs radically from a philosophical life in which ideas would be the purported possession, or the embodied knowledge, of the philosopher, or something of which he or she would have a positive and scientific knowledge. A life in the idea, a life dedicated to thought and philosophy, is, on the contrary, understood as a life in negativity: a life permeated by the negative nature of thought itself. But this also means that there is, in contrast to the false promises of ideology, nothing permanent, lasting or stable in philosophy that could provide finite human existence with a support – nothing, except for this negative transcendence, that philosophy can call its own. And this holds true in both an objective and a subjective sense. In distinction to

24 Ibid., p. 198.
25 Ibid.

his argument in "Ideology and Life in the Idea", Patočka now writes that man certainly is the place of freedom, the placeholder of this negative transcendence, but that this "does not mean that he is adequate to that experience".[26] On the contrary, "it stands above both objective and subjective existents", in such a way, Patočka continues, that this specific idea of freedom avoids "all subjectivism".[27] The idea of freedom, or the idea understood *as* freedom, thus remains, but in distinction to Patočka's previous discussions surrounding the life in the idea it is no longer an idea found *within* man; it is no longer something that we, as human beings, possess but something that makes all subjective self-assurance tremble. The emphasis has, in other words, shifted from a humanist, or subjectivist, understanding of freedom to an understanding in which freedom has to be based on the inherent negativity of the world, and not the other way around. The negative form of Platonism that Patočka envisions is thus, as he himself concludes, "that precarious position of philosophy that cannot lean on anything on earth or in heaven".[28]

The problematicity of politics and thought

Already in the essay "Negative Platonism" it is clear that a life in truth has a different meaning for Patočka than it does for Havel. Even though Havel would probably agree that a life in truth, in some respects, involves the uncertainty and negativity that Patočka keeps returning to, he seems, at times at least, to fall back on a rather naive understanding of truth, and on a naive understanding of man's relation to it. In his essay, Havel makes clear that truth is something natural to man, that we, by virtue of our very humanity, have an understanding of what truth means, and of what a life in truth implies, that we can always fall back upon, but that we, under conditions of political oppression, simply are too afraid to adopt or, for that matter, express. For Patočka, on the other hand, a life in the idea, or a life in truth, implies a life without certainty and a life *without* truth – at least if truth is understood as being something that man possesses and on which he can always rely. Truth is not something that man has any natural or uncomplicated relation

26 Ibid., p. 201

27 Ibid., p. 200. It is especially important to stress the break with humanism that takes place in the essay "Negative Platonism" since some commentators, such as Eric Manton, have tended to disregard it in favour of a reading that views "Ideology and Life in the Idea" and "Negative Platonism" as if they constituted one consistent argument. If anything, Patočka's arguments in "Negative Platonism", and then especially his stress on negativity, point towards his later philosophy. See Manton, E., "Patočka on Ideology and the Politics of Human Freedom", in *Jan Patočka and the European Heritage*, Studia Phaenomenologicum XII. Bucharest, Humanitas 2007.

28 Ibid., p. 205.

to, but it is, on the contrary, something that can only be approximated by way of the transcendence of the given, a transcendence that thereby discloses that the truth about the given is, in and of itself, *not* a given, but resides in the world as a whole, which, strictly speaking, never appears but instead withdraws in each presence.

These differences between Havel's and Patočka's conception of truth become even more pronounced if one considers Patočka's later philosophy (which Havel, incidentally, must have been much more familiar with) and then especially his reflections on the relation between philosophy and politics, and between truth and politics.[29] In his later magnum opus, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Patočka turns his attention to what he deems to be the common origin of philosophy, politics and history. This origin, or perhaps this lack of origin, is, like his previous reflections on the inherent negativity of philosophical thought, found in what Patočka now describes as a disorienting experience of a loss of meaning. This experience is, Patočka holds, common to philosophy, and perhaps the most notable example is to be found in the Greek understanding of wonder (*thaumazein*). Philosophy arises through wonder, but through a wonder that is felt as a shock, as the shocking discovery of a loss of meaning. However, in distinction to nihilism, this loss of meaning does not necessarily imply a form of resignation (even though it, quite naturally, can take this form) but is that which instigates philosophical thought and its quest *for* meaning. In a way that reminds us of his earlier understanding of a life in the idea, Patočka now states that "meaning can only arise in an activity which stems from a searching lack of meaning, as the vanishing point of being problematic, as an indirect epiphany".[30] He goes on to add:

> If we are not mistaken, then this discovering of meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence, as a new project of life, is the meaning of Socrates' existence. The constant shaking of the naive sense of meaningfulness is itself a new mode of being, a discovery of its continuity with the mysteriousness of being and what-is as a whole.[31]

29 Even though Havel only attended Patočka's later seminars, something that indicates that Patočka's later thought would have been more familiar to him, he did familiarise himself with Patočka's earlier work as well. In an interview he notes that he had "hungrily devoured" some of Patočka's texts already in the 1950s, despite the fact that no one was allowed to borrow them from the library ("a librarian looked the other way"). See Havel, V., *Disturbing the Peace*, p. 26.

30 Patočka, J., *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák. Chicago, Open Court 1996, p. 60–61.

31 Ibid., p. 61.

However, in distinction to his earlier texts, Patočka now adds that this experience, this shaking upheaval of meaning as such, is not only found in philosophy but in politics as well. Political life, Patočka writes, is "a permanent uprootedness, a lack of foundation".[32] Politics lacks its own foundation, just as philosophy lacks truth and meaning. This is not, however, a deficiency that one should try to redress but concerns the very nature of politics, and especially the nature of a democratic society. There is, in short, no foundation upon which a democratic society might rest. If there is such a thing as a foundation for democratic political life, it is a contested foundation, something that can only be determined by way of the conflicts that permeate, or at least should permeate, a democratic society. Patočka describes this as follows, by referring to *polemos*, one of the many Greek divinities of war, which Heraclitus made famous in a philosophical sense:

> *Polemos* is what is common. *Polemos* binds together the contending parties, not only because it stands over them but because in it they are one. In it there arises the one, unitary power and will from which alone all laws and constitutions derive, however different they may be.[33]

In an adjacent passage, Patočka then adds that "the spirit of the *polis* is a spirit of unity in conflict, in battle. One cannot be a citizen – *polites* – except in a community of some against others, and the conflict itself gives rise to the tension, the tenor of the life of the *polis*, the shape of the space of freedom that citizens both offer and deny each other in seeking support and overcoming resistance."[34] This understanding of politics, which Patočka developed in the years leading up to his engagement with Charter 77, also sheds light on his understanding of ideology. Ideology is not only a false promise of stability, which we as finite individuals are drawn to in the form of a political demigod, it also represents a false understanding of politics since it leads us to believe that our own position, be it socialist, liberal or conservative, is transcendent or neutral vis-à-vis the conflicts of political life. In light of the above, we could even say that the main problem with ideologies in Patočka's understanding, is that they tend to depoliticise politics – at least when their proponents fail to recognise the ideological nature of their own position and instead regard it as objectively true. On the basis of this, it is clear that Patočka would belong to what has today been called "post-foundational political thought", a strand of thinking that stresses the contingent and historical

32 Ibid., p. 38.
33 Ibid., p. 42.
34 Ibid., p. 41–42.

nature of each political foundation and emphasises the antagonistic nature of politics.[35] To be sure, the antagonism in and of politics is to a large extent ideological in nature, something with which Patočka would surely agree. The target of his critique is thus not ideologies per se, but the way in which ideologies function as purported (neutral) foundations that mask or overshadow the true abysmal and antagonistic nature of the political domain.[36]

Philosophy and politics are thus related since both revolve around a certain openness to the abysmal and inescapable loss of meaning, which characterises human existence as a whole. Philosophy is forever haunted by the absence of meaning, and politics is, to paraphrase Claude Lefort, forever haunted by its own "empty place", an emptiness that offers itself up as its only foundation – as the contested absence that dictates political life.[37] Philosophy and politics are thus two expressions of what Patočka calls a life in problematicity, a life that does not seek to avoid the disorientation of existence but instead faces it undaunted.[38] However, the relation between philosophy and politics is not only based on a certain experience of a meaningful loss of meaning; the bonds between these two domains stretch further back than that. Both politics *and* philosophy are, Patočka contends, conflictual in nature. They are, as he repeatedly stresses in the *Heretical Essays*, both constituted by *polemos*. A life in problematicity is therefore not only a life in which the experience of a finite disorientation has centre stage, it is also a life that is permeated by conflict. It is, to be sure, a life that is characterised by a certain openness to the world, but by an openness that, as Patočka writes, concomitantly "warns us that we should not yield to the inclination to absolutize particular ways of understanding meaning and the meaningfulness appropriate to them".[39]

35 See Marchart, O., *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 2007.

36 Having said this, it is, however, clear that what we encounter in Patočka's thought is not a full-fledged political theory. Instead, his reflections on the nature of political life are embedded within his wider philosophy of history. For this reason, there are no reflections or analyses in his work that address how ideologies function within parliamentary democracies, nor do we encounter any sustained analysis of how modern political parties operate.

37 See Lefort, C., "Permanence du théologico-politique?" *Essais sur le politique – XIXe-XXe siècles*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil 1986.

38 The concept of "problematicity", which is central to Patočka's argument in the *Heretical Essays*, is originally a reformulation of Wilhelm Weischedel's concept "*fraglichkeit*". One should therefore try to hear both the connotations of questionable and of uncertain (from *fraglich*) in the concept. See Weischedel, W., *Skeptische Ethik*. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp 1976, p. 36.

39 Patočka, J., *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 58.

Conclusion

Returning to Havel's essay, I would first like to point out that there are many similarities between Havel's and Patočka's respective understanding of ideology. Havel's idea that the primary function of ideology is to "provide people with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the universe" reflect Patočka's conception that an ideology presents itself in the form of a false promise of stability and structure for the finite existence of man.[40] However, as I hope to have shown by now, matters become more complicated when it comes to the notion of "a life in truth". Contrary to Patočka's later understanding of a life in problematicity, I would argue that Havel presents what one could call an unproblematic understanding of truth. Whereas a life in problematicity, according to Patočka, represents a life in which truth appears as an "indirect epiphany" or as a vanishing point in the distance that is always permeated by conflict, truth is something natural, according to Havel, something that is congenial to human nature as such. According to Havel, man always possesses the possibility of tearing the veil of ideology asunder in favour of a natural existence in truth, devoid of any political conflict. It is for this very reason that Havel can call the position he expounds in "The Power of the Powerless" existential or "pre-political". The political philosophy of Patočka is certainly existential in nature as well, but whereas the existential form of politics that Havel envisions seems to be devoid of conflict – devoid of politics we might even add, which is why it can be qualified as *pre*-political in the first place – the existential basis of politics is more of an abyss than a secure foundation in Patočka's work.

Whether or not Havel misunderstood or misinterpreted Patočka is not the main issue here, and if he did, it was in many respects a fruitful misinterpretation. But if we leave the question of interpretation aside, it is clear that this productive misinterpretation gives rise to a highly questionable understanding of the relation between truth and ideology, and between philosophy and politics. I think this point is explicated quite clearly by Jacques Derrida in a text in which he discusses the political stakes of any form of teaching in philosophy. In this text, which in English is entitled "Where a Teaching Body Begins", Derrida writes:

> By naturalizing, by affecting to consider as natural what is not and has never been natural, one neutralizes. One neutralizes what? One conceals,

40 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless", p. 360.

> rather, in an effect of neutrality, the active intervention of a force and a machinery.[41]

Something quite similar to this can be said about Havel's attempt at naturalising truth. By naturalising truth, Havel neutralises truth and thereby conceals, to quote Derrida, "the active intervention of a force and a machinery". In Havel's case, he conceals the active force of his own ideology that he neutralises in the form of a pre-political factor. In relation to this, we can then add that the problem of ideology, and its inherent danger, lies not, first and foremost, in its content, nor in its direct effects, but in the fact that it constantly conceals itself in order to function. It conceals itself as ideology, by taking on other masks (the mask of truth, for example) and by hiding behind institutions, but it also conceals the problematic nature of truth as such. What one finds behind the veil of ideology, if it is at all possible to thoroughly break through this veil, is not then, as Havel suggests, reality and truth, which, unhindered by ideological phantasms, would once more shine forth in their moral and epistemological purity, but rather political conflict, and a political conflict that is waged precisely in relation to truth. When one fails to see this, it is to a large extent due to the fact that one is blinded by one's own ideological position, which is regarded as true and natural, whereas every other position is false and unnatural. Perhaps the main lesson to be drawn from Havel's essay is that a pre-political form of politics is not only impossible but also inherently dangerous since it tends to naturalise not only truth but also those who possess it, thereby – potentially at least and against Havel's own intentions – turning any opponent into something far worse than a political opponent, namely, something false, unnatural and thereby potentially inhuman.

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41 Derrida, J., "Where a Teaching Body Begins", trans. Jan Plug, in *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? – Right to Philosophy 1*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2002, p. 69.

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