Political and Social Sciences Department

East Meets West: Richard Rorty and Jan Patocka on Freedom

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*A Czech philosopher brought into dialogue with American postmodernism*

Today, in current debates about liberalism, there is no consensus about how to defend or justify liberal principles for its traditional justifications - be they based in reason, nature or God, have become discredited. And thus, those who attempt to reconcile a need for absolute values with the acknowledgment of the dubious nature of these traditional absolute justifications now encounter great difficulty. For example, efforts by liberals such as Isaiah Berlin to soften these absolute defenses while still holding on to the value of human dignity, and the equality and freedom which underlie it, are criticized as attempting the impossible.¹ Of course, Richard Rorty is now well known for attempting to change the terms of this debate, by arguing that such defenses of liberalism are unnecessary. But while Rorty’s views are increasingly subject to criticism, there is no agreement on how to rebut his position.² It thus may be very useful to contrast Rorty’s views with a thinker who is little known in America, but whose position, especially his outlook on freedom, is diametrically opposed to Rorty’s: the Czech dissident philosopher Jan Patočka.³
Patočka belongs to the same generation of scholars such as Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss who were schooled in the classical tradition and studied with the most important thinkers of pre-War Continental Europe, both Husserl and Heidegger. His commentaries on the history of political thought, especially his studies of Plato and Aristotle, as well as his explanations of phenomenology are themselves worthy of scholarly attention. However, unlike Arendt and Strauss, Patočka did not flee to the West, instead remaining in Czechoslovakia first under the Nazi and then Soviet regime. When Czech dissidents wrote their manifesto Charter 77 calling for the recognition of universal human rights after the adoption of the Helsinki Agreement in 1977, Patočka was one of its signers issuing a declaration in defence of the rights of man along with the Charter. Shortly after, he was detained by the local authorities, and during prolonged interrogation, died of heart failure. It is thus not surprising that what is central to his thought are his meditations on what he was deprived almost his entire adult life: freedom.

While many of Patočka’s writings have been translated into several European languages, in America - despite the appearance of an introduction to his work along with a translation of several of his essays by the University of Chicago Press - he is still almost entirely unknown. These are the misfortunes of writing in a minor European language. However, Patočka’s
thought has been indirectly disseminated through another Czech who has found recognition upon the world stage: Václav Havel. Havel’s insistence on living in truth, on philosophic reflection as care of the soul, and recognition of humility, a humility that there is something greater than man in the universe towards which human beings must show reverence and respect, all find their intellectual underpinnings in the thought of Jan Patočka.

However, Patočka is not of interest today because of his status as a Cold-war martyr, nor because of his influence on Václav Havel, but rather because his considerations on freedom are still particularly important. Although he categorically defends human rights and human dignity as absolutes, writing that "humankind needs to be convinced of the unconditional validity of principles which are, in that sense, "sacred", valid for all humans and at all times, and capable of setting out humanity’s goals," he was at the same time aware of the precariousness of these values. Indeed, already in 1953, long before Derrida and Lyotard, and long before the spread of postmodern discourse in America, Patočka was writing about the death of metaphysics, acknowledging in the wake of the critiques of reason of Nietzsche and Heidegger, that "the metaphysical era of philosophy has come to a close." However, unlike Richard Rorty, Patočka does not counsel a turn towards contingency. Indeed, in his
thought we find an implicit critique of the idea of freedom as contingency that Rorty currently advocates.

**Freedom as Contingency**

Richard Rorty characterizes freedom as the recognition of contingency, a recognition that human beings no longer are beholden to any higher natural or divine order and so are free to live however they may desire. In fact, they are freed even from the need to reflect on or justify this freedom at all, freed from "having to answer the question, 'in what does the privileged status of freedom consist?'" Rorty's notion of freedom as contingency comes from his reflections on the history of Western philosophy. He describes this history as founded upon the belief that truth is a matter of objective inquiry, that the universe is built according to a divine or rational plan which philosophical reflection can penetrate. But this belief in truth restricts human freedom, for if there is a plan according to which the cosmos is structured and which man is to follow, then living a good life becomes less a question of choice as much as conforming to the truth; if the philosopher's life is dedicated to finding the truth and living according to it, then once he finds the truth he has no choice but to follow it. And so, if we realize the philosophical quest beginning with Plato of looking for absolute truth is a futile
one, that truth is not found but rather created, the result is radically liberating. And this is exactly Rorty’s diagnosis. He tells us that the Western philosophical tradition has become discredited, that truth is not a matter of objective inquiry. Instead, according to Rorty, truth is merely a matter of what he calls “we intentions” or the particular historical beliefs of a specific community. Rather than discovery of truth, philosophy is only at bottom a matter of reinterpretation or poetry. Consequently, we become free to create ourselves in anyway we wish, to follow Rorty’s ideal of the “strong poet” who creates an original life of his own.

However, freedom as the recognition of contingency is a complicated matter; there are more elements to it than Rorty presents, elements we should consider before we make a judgment about either its veracity or its attractiveness.

First, there are two sides to freedom as contingency: one side is, to be sure, the side of exhilaration, but the other is, to the contrary, one of emptiness. The philosophers who first announced the radical historicity of existence - Nietzsche, and then Heidegger, claimed that contingency is linked to despair, a sense of meaninglessness. The freedom that is acquired through the destruction of all previous idols and the recognition that man is alone in the universe is accompanied by nihilism. However, Rorty’s notion of contingency does not include this kind of
pessimism, it is simply a celebration of human freedom, a freedom that may express itself through poetry, of creating an original life like no other before it.

One might think this difference is merely a matter of emphasis, an instance of American optimism versus European pessimism - Rorty Americanizes Nietzsche's self-creativity, tossing away its continental pessimism with the same exuberance that he speaks of privatizing Nietzsche's irony and thus ridding it of its unpalatable political implications. However, there is much more to the question than that. For these different conceptions of contingency point to the potential difficulties in pledging allegiance to the Rortian ideal. Rorty tells us that the culture of his contingent community would "aim at curing us of our 'deep metaphysical need'" of looking for absolute truth. But we might wonder how simple and how effective Rorty's cure may be. It might be the case that Rorty is right, that a thoroughly secularized liberal culture may be plausible. Indeed, though it is his worst nightmare, Nietzsche describes this kind of culture as the future world of the last man - the human being that is indifferent to all transcendence. However, it also may be the case that Rorty does not sufficiently weigh the empirical fact that yearnings for transcendence, for "truth that is out there", whether it be expressed in philosophical reason, communion with nature or God have been part of how human beings have defined themselves since the
beginning of recorded history. And so to try to get rid of this side of human behavior may be neither simple nor painless. Moreover, Rorty’s position also does not seem to be an accurate reflection of mainstream American culture. While secularism prevails in the intellectual circles of universities, empirical studies affirm that Americans are still a very religious people.

Still, we should also examine not only the plausibility of applying Rorty’s ideal, but also whether it is itself internally consistent.

The End of Metaphysics

In popular discourse, “metaphysical” is used as an adjective describing the abstract, the abstruse, and often the irrelevant. Today in the academy, this characterization has gone even further. Metaphysics has become a dirty word. Contemporary philosophy is now more often than not characterized as postmetaphysical.\(^\text{13}\) And according to Richard Rorty, the Western philosophical tradition has “outlived its usefulness” for the absolute metaphysics formulated by this tradition, in varieties of different ways, have now become discredited. Consequently, philosophy can do without metaphysics entirely now.

Here it is useful to introduce Patočka as a contrast to Rorty. Patočka is largely in agreement with
Rorty that metaphysics, or absolutes which are to be guaranteed by a science that is to describe all what is in and above nature — or metaphysic, are no longer convincing. However, rather than claiming that philosophy should rid itself of metaphysics entirely, Patočka announces his goal to “overcome and preserve (aufheben)” metaphysics to show:

how traditional metaphysics contains a reference to the experience within it so that we can explain why the human spirit returns to metaphysics ever again, in spite of its putative emptiness and invalidity, demonstrated a hundred times, in spite of its being indefensible, even meaningless from the standpoint of objective rationality.14

Patočka argues that attempts to get rid of metaphysics are futile, first of all, because moral evaluation is inescapable, and second, because every kind of moral evaluation always has a metaphysical component. He explains that human existence cannot be indifferent or entirely neutral, but that life by definition demands that we make evaluative, or moral judgments: “we are not in the world as indifferent observers and witnesses but existence in the world is that which matters to us most...Being is always the object of positive or negative interest.” He then also makes the stronger claim that “value is nothing else but the meaningfulness of Being expressed, that...at bottom, values do not mean anything else, but that Being is comprehensible or meaningful, and they signify that which ‘gives’ it meaning.”15
But how does it follow from the fact that life does not allow complete neutrality in ethics that every kind of ethical claim is in one way or another always accompanied by a metaphysical position? Patočka answers by way of example. He points out that every anti-metaphysical position, despite its intentions, still makes metaphysical claims. He cites nihilism and positivism as two illustrations of his point. The positivist wishes to distinguish between facts and values, and claims that reason may tell us nothing about the nature of values, that they are merely arbitrary constructs. But behind the positivist's position, is the assumption that values are not sustainable to rational evaluation because there is nothing to reason about, and that means that our world, and by implication our universe, itself is not susceptible to reason or rational evaluation. Similarly, in his reflections on nihilism, Patočka notes that in denying the possibility of any kind of rationally defensible moral principles, the nihilist oversteps the bounds of his doubts and slides into dogmatism: his denial of morality is accompanied by the metaphysical position that the nature of the universe is a chaotic one: "nihilism demonstrates itself to be dogmatic as soon as it proclaims meaninglessness as the final and incontrovertible fact" of the nature of the whole.¹⁶

Patočka's cautioning about the inevitability of metaphysics is particularly insightful when we consider
Richard Rorty. For it seems that Rorty can serve as an illustration of Patočka’s lesson. First of all, while there is an obvious moral aim behind Rorty’s writing, at the same time he also would like to maintain a certain kind of sceptical neutrality. He counsels that, because of the failures of the past attempts at finding truth in the history of philosophy, we should become what he calls "ironists". Such an ironist, or sceptic, would have three main qualities: she would have radical and continuing doubts about the "final vocabulary she currently uses", she would realize that "argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts", and thirdly "she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others." This third element of the ironist points to a certain kind of neutrality: the ironist wants to remain agnostic or neutral on whether her beliefs mirror the nature of reality. Moreover, the first two premises point to sceptical neutrality because they demand a continual questioning of one’s beliefs: if this kind of questioning were continually pursued, the ideal would have to be a neutral one, of a sceptical life that remains in a state of doubt, of perpetual questioning.

Rorty would like to remain agnostic on metaphysical questions. He cautions that he wants to avoid the error of self-referential inconsistency, warning that "to say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have
discovered, that out there, there is no truth."\textsuperscript{18} However, he departs from this neutrality on this question of truth in claiming that the ironist is dedicated to two other premises: she is a "nominalist and a historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence."\textsuperscript{19} These last two premises are in tension with the previous ones for they are not subjected to question; moreover, they themselves point to particular metaphysical positions. Historicism and materialism are accompanied by the metaphysical assumption that morality is not underwritten by the nature of the cosmos, that man is entirely alone. And Rorty implicitly endorses these metaphysical positions, proclaiming in various instances that his purpose is to "de-divinize the World", that in its ideal form:

a culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened secular, thorough and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are non-human forces to which human beings should be responsible."\textsuperscript{20}

Contingency is thus a position that is accompanied by metaphysical assumptions, assumptions that reveal themselves to be based on undefended and seemingly unexamined premises.

However, if Patočka is in agreement with Rorty that all past historical attempts at foundationalism, at finding absolute justifications - and so any kind of absolute metaphysics - have found to be wanting, and yet at the same time he claims that metaphysics are inevitable and necessary for every kind of moral
reflection, where does this leave philosophy? Patočka’s answer is that philosophy need not, and indeed should not be expected to provide absolute answers. Moreover, precisely through reflecting on why philosophy cannot yield absolute answers, he claims we may come to answers about the nature of freedom and human dignity.

Philosophy as the Problematicity of Being

Richard Rorty writes that if there were an objective truth that philosophy could ascertain, then:

to understand the context in which we necessarily live... would be to give us a mind exactly as long as the universe itself, a lading-list which was a copy of the universe’s own list. What counted as existing, as possible, or as important, for us, would be what really is possible, or important. Having copied this list, one could die with satisfaction, having accomplished the only task laid upon humanity, to know the truth, to be in touch with what is “out there”.

But Patočka explains that this kind of approach to philosophy is itself a mistaken one. He remarks that rather than providing a “lading list” of truths about the nature of the universe, the task of philosophy is a different one: to recognize what he calls the “problematicity of Being.” Patočka writes that there seem to be two fundamentally opposed possible understandings of the nature of Being. On the one hand, one may assume, following the Platonic, Christian or Kantian traditions, that Being is harmonious, that
moral principles are eternally underwritten by the nature of a divinely ordered universe. On the other, Being is understood to be chaotic, without a rationally discernible order, an understanding that finds its modern manifestations in the nihilism of Nietzsche, but also in older forms, in the pre-Socratic such as Heraclitus, and in the moral denials of the Greek sophists. Patočka, however, points out that both of these two fundamental alternatives show themselves to be unsatisfactory, because both are based on certain kinds of dogmatism. But rather than abandoning the traditional understanding of philosophy as Rorty would suggest in the wake of this always irreconcilable historical philosophical debate, Patočka claims that the fact of this perpetual disagreement itself is philosophically significant: it warns us against “giving in to tendencies that would absolutize certain kinds of meaning and their related significance.” Or to use Rorty’s language, Patočka warns us against looking for “lading lists” that would provide final and absolute answers about the nature of the universe.

Absolutism, whether it is manifested as nihilism or as the positing of absolute metaphysics, is always accompanied by dogmatism. But, according to Patočka, the seeming impossibility of absolute metaphysical justification, rather than leading to a pessimistic scepticism, instead is testimony to human freedom. He claims that the activity of philosophy, or the ability to grasp the problem of Being, “not simplify or
caricature Being” to ask what is the structure of the universe, to reflect upon it, is the fundamental act of freedom. And the structure of Being underpinning this freedom, precisely because the nature of Being is such that it cannot be grasped in any absolute way. Consequently, the enigmatic nature of the universe paradoxically creates an absolute, but of a different kind: the perpetual possibility of freedom, a freedom that is manifested through the activity of philosophy and is always possible because of the fact that philosophical reflection is not allowed to find a permanent resting place in any one dogmatic absolute position.

Thus, rather than despairing of the possibility of finding truth, or throwing up his hands in frustration that philosophy does not yield to unproblematic certainty, Patočka celebrates this problematicity of philosophy, arguing that the structure of Being or the whole or the universe - the terminology is interchangeable here - is such that it is testimony to human freedom, for the perpetual possibility of philosophy demonstrates that freedom is an essential part of the human condition. And this, according to Patočka, is the basis of human dignity, a dignity that is based in humanity’s ability - the sole species on the planet endowed with this possibility - to reflect upon its purpose and its status in the universe.

Patočka further explains how the problematicity of Being underwrites human dignity. He warns that to
resort to traditional absolute forms of metaphysics means to “consider the meaning of being as something given and so to give up for good questions about its origins.” Instead, he appeals to the beginning of Greek philosophy in what Plato describes as *thauma arche tes sophias* and Aristotle cites as *dia to thaumatein*: philosophy, or wisdom, begins with the experience of wonder. This wonder is, according to Patočka, “wonder not at individual specific realities, but in front of this original reality”, that is, the experience of the whole, that man is able to reflect upon the miracle of his existence and upon the enigma of Being. Patočka explains that this experience of wonder is important, not only because it signals the beginning of freedom, the precise moment when man begins to philosophize, but also because it constantly points to humility: to acknowledge that man is not the most powerful and most knowing element in the universe. It indicates that he should live in humble respect of all that is in nature, and in this way leads to the respect of human dignity.

Thus, in Patočka’s thought, freedom, philosophy, transcendence and the pursuit of truth are all intertwined. For him, the “experience of freedom is always an experience of the whole, an experience of the meaning of the whole” for it begins with philosophy, that is a meditation on the nature of the universe, and is sustained by the structure of this whole, one that refuses to be enchained by absolute philosophical
answers. Consequently, freedom is fundamentally "the experience of transcendence." In this way freedom is also inextricably tied to truth, or more precisely, the pursuit of truth: freedom is "always in its deepest sense the freedom to truth", because freedom is most fundamentally expressed as philosophical inquiry, or the attempt to divine the truth about the nature of the whole.28

Liberalism and Expressions of Freedom

Patočka and Rorty thus give us two radically different visions of human freedom. One portrays freedom as the recognition of contingency, of man as liberated from obligation to anything that might be greater than or beyond man. The other offers a picture of freedom as a celebration of the enigma of Being, freedom expressed as philosophical reflection that always points beyond man to meditation on metaphysics, and though it culminates in a scepticism about all absolutes, it is characterized by a humble awareness that there may be something greater than man. Yet both Patočka and Rorty are committed to liberal democracy. Patočka speaks of defending human rights, of aiming to "subordinate politics to justice" and of solidarity with the victims who are denied these rights.29 Rorty also speaks of solidarity, of the prevention of political cruelty, of a wish to make the world "more
tolerant, more liberal." However, despite these similarities, their disagreement on the nature of freedom points to a very different understanding of the relationship of mankind towards power, an understanding which may have significantly different political implications.

This topic - the relationship of man to power - plays a fundamental role in Patočka's thought. Following in the tradition of Heidegger's *Question concerning the Essence of Technology* and Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences*, Patočka is concerned with the turn in modern philosophy towards making man, in Bacon's famous phrasing, "the lord and master of all nature" and how this orientation away from contemplation of nature towards its manipulation, towards explanation instead of understanding, may serve to close off avenues of human possibility. Patočka writes that, because of this orientation, human beings may forget about the more general question of their relation and place in the universe:

Therein precisely lies the danger. The uncovering that prevails at the essential core of technology necessarily loses sight of uncovering itself, concealing the essential core of truth in an unfamiliar way and so closing man's access to what he himself is - a being capable of standing in an original relation to the truth. Among all the securing, calculating, and using of raw materials, that which makes all this possible is lost from view - man henceforth knows only individual, practical truths, not the truth.

Patočka's worry is that in adopting the modern philosophical outlook of manipulation of nature, man
gives up an essential part of what is human: the human relation to Being, through which Being manifests itself as a philosophical problem. And this attitude may be dangerous because the will to dominate nature is not accompanied by respect and humility to nature, or what Patočka deems in his Heideggerian terminology, openness to Being. This strand of Patočka’s thought has been picked up by Václav Havel. Central to many of his speeches and writings is the Patočka inspired idea that moral responsibility must find its source in an awareness and respect for the enigmatic and mysterious nature of Being. He writes that:

I believe that we little chance of averting an environmental catastrophe unless we recognize that we are not the masters of Being but only a part of Being,...We must recognize that, we are related to more than the present moment and the present place, that we are related to the world as a whole and to eternity. We must recognize that, failing to reflect universal, supraindividual and supratemporal interests, we do a disservice to our specific, local and immediate interests. Only people with a sense of responsibility for the world and to the world are truly responsible to themselves.31

While Rorty’s aim is to radically alter the understanding of what it means to philosophize, to fundamentally distance himself from, and overturn, the modern philosophical tradition, from Patočka’s perspective what he still holds in common with this tradition, despite all his scathing criticisms of it, is its attitude towards power. In Rorty’s thought human beings have an incredible capacity because they are now free to create themselves and their values in any way they desire. And while this notion of power differs
from the Baconian-Cartesian tradition in that it no longer speaks about, or is concerned with, all of nature, instead devoting itself to the power human beings have over their own lives, it is still consistent with this modern tradition because it does not recognize any limits to human capability.

Despite Patočka’s and Havel’s diagnoses, this does not mean that Rorty should be identified with lack of moral responsibility: his intentions are to the contrary, to imbue human beings with greater responsibility to each other through the recognition of cruelty as the universal vice. The interesting question is whether a recognition of cruelty as something universally wrong may serve as a sufficient source of responsibility, or whether Patočka’s argument that an openness to transcendence is a more effective or even necessary one. This is an empirical question not a philosophical one. However, what is striking about a theory of liberalism based on the recognition of cruelty is that it only directly speaks about the relationship human beings have towards each other. It does not say anything about the relation which human beings ought to have towards the environment in which they live, to the rest of nature. This omission, at the very least, bids us to listen to Patočka’s case.

Patočka thus encourages us to reconsider the importance of transcendence, or spirituality. Metaphysics has a bad name in the history of political thought less for not delivering on its promise of
certainty than for the human suffering associated with it, first through the conflict and oppression carried out in the name of the absolute dogmas of the Church and second through the excesses of the secular dogmas of all modern ideologies. And this is perhaps why thinkers such as Rorty would like to banish metaphysics and the spiritual aspirations that feed it, to lead us to a sober, secular humanism: because higher spiritual aspirations are politically dangerous, always seeming to lead to intolerance and destruction. But Patocka teaches us that we should not throw out the baby with the bath water. While metaphysical certainty may be dangerous in providing absolute platforms upon which to launch oppression, this does not mean that metaphysics is unavoidable nor that it necessarily implies the adoption of dogmatic absolutes. His most valuable lesson is that spirituality may be joined with scepticism and modesty, in a model of Socratic scepticism informed by humility that strives for a non-dogmatic openness to the possibility of transcendence.
Notes:


3The Czech letter č is pronounced like the "ch" in cherry. Thus, the correct pronunciation of Patočka is Patochka.


7Negative Platonism (Prague: Cesky spisovatel, 1990), p. 9. All translations of Patočka’s work are my own, unless otherwise noted. This essay can also be found in Kohak ibid., pp. 175-206.

8Ibid. p. 57.


10There is a further dimension to contingency as well: the concept of freedom is also not unproblematic in a thoroughly materialistic world. Rorty is content to answer that "genuine novelty can, after all, occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces...for all we know, or should care, Aristotle’s metaphorical use of ouisia, Saint Paul’s metaphorical use of agape and Newton’s metaphorical use of gravitas, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy - some obsessionnal kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata." (Contingency, p.17) However, there is a long debate in the philosphical tradition about how man may be free if all there is is matter, that stretches from Democritus’ reflections on the movement of atoms to La Mettrie’s claim that we are prisoners of our physiology to Isaiah Berlin’s defences of libert against determinism. This is not the place to discuss this question. It
is enough merely to mention that the question is not a philosophically uncontroversial one.

11 Contingency, op. cit. p. 46.

12 This is also not the first time that philosophy has been proposed as a cure. Perhaps the most famous formulation of this idea is Lucretius' attempt to rid mankind of all thought about divinity. But rather than succeeding in his aim to "loose the mind from the close knots of superstition" Epicurus' cure was supplanted by Christianity. (De Rerum Natura trans. W.H. Rouse, Harvard University Press, 1975 I.935) Thus to bring about such a "cure", to rid human beings of all reflections about the truth may be a more difficult task than Rorty proposes.


14 "Negative Platonism" op. cit., p.45.


16 Ibid. p. 85.

17 Contingency, Ibid. p. 73.

18 Ibid. p. 8.

19 Ibid. p. 40.

20 Ibid. p.21, p.45.

21 Ibid. p.27.

22 "What is the meaning of History?", op. cit., p. 69.

23 Ibid. p.69.

24 "The beginnings of history" in Heretical op. cit., p.63.

25 "What is the meaning of history", op. cit. p.69.

26 Plato, Theatetus 155d; Aristotle Metaphysics I, 2 982 b 12.

27 Platon et Europe, op. cit. p. 69.

29"Two Charta 77 Texts", op. cit., p.343-4.

30"The Dangers of Technicization of Science; Essence of Technology as Danger" in Kohak, op. cit., p. 331.

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