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# Jan Patočka's Reversal of Dostoevsky and Charter 77

**Abstract**

*Jan Patočka became politically active for the first time as a spokesperson of the dissident movement Charter 77. In this capacity he wrote several essays, the first of which, entitled "On the Matters of The Plastic People of the Universe and DG 307", I interpret as the explanation and justification of his turn toward political engagement. The following article is a reading of Patočka's essay that pays particular attention to a peculiar formal feature of the essay – namely that it's presented as a reversal of Dostoevsky's short story "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man". In reversing this story, Patočka shows us the two basic ways of human life and explains his political engagement as an action taken on behalf of the properly human way of life, which he calls "life in truth" or "the responsible life". The purpose of his political engagement thus wasn't defending human rights, but defending life in truth, to which human rights provide suitable conditions. "On the Matters…" also presents Patočka's assessment of the Communist regime with clarity and severity not seen elsewhere in his writings, and shows a shift in his views of youth and youthful rebellion.*

**Keywords:** Jan Patočka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Charter 77, responsibility, political engagement, way of life

Although Jan Patočka has been drifting toward political activity in the years after 1968 – for example, by holding private seminars and lectures that were *de iure* legal but *de facto* carried significant risks for everyone involved[1] – his first and only act of overt political engagement was becoming one of the original three spokespersons of Charter 77. As is well known, the Charter was initiated as a reaction to the 1976 arrest and trial of members of the Czech underground bands *The Plastic People of the Universe* and *DG 307* on trumped-up charges of "hooliganism" (a catch-all term readily usable against anyone opposing the regime) in what seemed like a beginning of a new wave of repression. The opposition to this trial brought together dissident intellectuals and underground musicians and fused them into a common movement of resistance against the Communists. To make this alliance public, to gain any possible public support for it, and to clearly delineate what they did and did not aim for, this movement was announced by the *Manifesto of Charter 77* on

[1] Findlay expresses this accurately by saying these seminars were "for interested students willing to risk their careers for the sake of truth and their studies." (Findlay 2002, 131)

January 1, 1977. The *Manifesto* claimed to desire no change in the government, the Constitution, or the laws, and to be in full conformity with the Czechoslovak laws; it merely called on the government to observe the human rights of the Czechoslovak citizens to which it committed itself in the Helsinki Accords of 1975. The *Manifesto* – as was expected – was met with a furious reaction by the Communists,[2] and just a little more than two months later, on March 13, 1977, Patočka died of brain hemorrhage which he suffered as a consequence of prolonged interrogations by the authorities (Kohák 1989, 3).

It is, however, less well-known what led Patočka himself to this risky undertaking that ultimately cost him his life. The scholarly opinions show little consensus on this issue. Tucker (2000, 87) believes Patočka did it for the sake of "basic and absolute human rights – the basis of justice and the preconditions of truth". Kohák (1989, 130–1) thinks this was an act of assuming responsibility, but he sees it as merely the responsibility of one concerned citizen among many, a "modest concrete gesture" striving to improve the conditions in Communist Czechoslovakia. Findlay (2002, 151–4) explains Patočka's engagement as morally motivated and is concerned mainly with showing that Patočka didn't base it in a metaphysical conviction that would subvert his overall effort to overcome metaphysics.

I believe none of these explanations hits the nerve of Patočka's thinking about his political engagement, and in this article I want to demonstrate it on the basis of Patočka's own – widely neglected – essay on this subject. He produced six short essays and an interview during his brief tenure as the spokesperson of Charter 77, all of which have been published in Vol. 12 of his *Collected Works*. Most of these are "public" writings[3] and hence take an appropriate tone – they use a Kantian language that is accessible to anyone and does not require philosophical training to be understood, such as that "it is morality that defines what being human means" (Patočka 2006a, 429/341)[4] or that morality entails an obligation to oneself to resist injustice. However, the first of these essays, *On the Matters of The Plastic People of the Universe and DG 307*,[5] dated to December 1976 and hence written before

[2] Patočka himself speaks of a "furious onslaught" and "vicious attack" against Charter 77 (Patočka 2006b, 441–2/344–5).

[3] In so far as that was possible. Charter 77 and its representatives were not allowed any space in the media to present their cause and all that appeared in the media about it was Communist lies. The *Manifesto of Charter 77* and other related writings including Patočka's essays were distributed as *samizdat*, and their "public" character lies in that their intended audience was outside of Patočka's phenomenological circle. To these "public" essays belong both of the Charter 77 essays translated by Kohák (see Kohák 1989).

[4] Page numbers to *Plato and Europe*, *Heretical Essays*, and other texts that have also been translated into English refer first to the original Czech, then to the English translation.

[5] There have been two earlier translations, which I have consulted in translating *On the Matters…* anew: one in Skilling 1981, 205–207, the other is listed under Patočka 2006c. These however take certain liberties with Patočka's text and do not accurately render his terminology. Furthermore, this

Charter 77 was proclaimed, is "private":[6] it is addressed only to Patočka's friends and students. Patočka speaks here in his own voice, in words which he thought through many times over and which are properly his own; and being written not long before his death, this essay demonstrates his most mature thought.

The purpose of this paper is to explain the grounds of Patočka's engagement in Charter 77 by means of a close reading of this essay. My point of departure will be a peculiar formal feature of it – namely that it is presented as a reversal of Dostoevsky's short story *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. The notion of the reversal is a central structuring element of this essay, and I shall track the reversals of various elements of *The Dream…* to show that it contains a synoptic expression of Patočka's philosophic politics. *On the Matters…* explains on the space of a mere three pages, in great shorthand and with enormous artfulness, Patočka's understanding of that which is and of the attitude it calls for from the one who sees it – and thereby it explains and justifies his political engagement. Thus I agree with Kohák (but differently than Kohák means it) that Patočka never considered "the particular problems that emerge in the history of the human sojourn in this world [as] unrelated to perennial philosophical issues" (Kohák 1989, 4). I intend to show that the main subject of *On the Matters…* is the fundamental question of *πῶς βιωτέον*. This essay outlines not just Patočka's answer to this question, namely that the good life is life in truth which also means a responsible life, but also his conclusion that when this way of life itself is at stake, as it was when the Communists prosecuted the underground musicians for their attempts to live it, it is necessary for one who understands its importance – in this case, for Patočka himself – to stand up in its defense so that this substantial human good may be perpetuated. Besides this central subject, *On the Matters…* informs us about two other aspects of Patočka's thought. First, it contains his assessment of Communism with clarity and severity not seen elsewhere in his writings: namely that it is a regime of the universal lie, and that it differs in kind – not just in degree – from the Western forms of technological civilization.

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essay was merely a timely feuilleton for the earlier translators, and no thorough interpretation of it has been written yet.

[6] Findlay (2002, 133) suggests that this may be a version of Straussian exotericism. That is a tempting idea given that Patočka knew of Strauss and even speaks of his "highly remarkable conclusions" in *Heretical Essays* (p. 86n of the Czech edition; this and all other Patočka's footnotes are absent from the English translation). However, there are two important differences in their respective approaches. First, the Straussian exoteric writing contains both the exoteric and the esoteric message within a single text, while Patočka divides his messages into separate essays. Second, the purpose of Straussian exotericism is to attract "trustworthy and intelligent readers only" by concealing the true message of the text from the eyes of the censors (Strauss 1988, 24–5), while Patočka's "exoteric" texts rather seek to attract a more varied general readership by providing them with a more accessible version of the same message, hiding nothing from the censors. Also see Findlay (2002, 179–80) for a more general comparison of Patočka's and Strauss' approach to politics.

And second, it shows a more benevolent view of the value of youthful rebellion than his earlier writings.

## 1. The reversed story

The first paragraph of "*On the Matters…"* gives us a brief summary of *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. Patočka highlights four features of the story: 1) that a sinful man, 2) a product of a sinful world, which is to say *our* world, 3) was transported to a world of "sinless and blessed human beings", 4) whom he irreversibly corrupts. At the beginning of the second paragraph Patočka speculates on how it would be possible to reverse this story, and fleshes out this idea in the second to fifth paragraphs. He immediately performs a reversal of three of the highlighted features of *The Dream…*: now, 1) innocent, sinless human beings, 2) coming from a different galaxy, 3) are transported to a planet, which clearly is our sinful Earth. Our Earth's sinfulness is demonstrated in the short summary of the previous few decades: Patočka points out the flaws of the interwar democracies and the manifest evils of Nazism which rose up against them. Both democracy and Nazism are however a matter of the past now: the present is ruled by the Communists.

A closer look at what Patočka says about Communism[7] here reveals that *On the Matters…* contains a sober and penetrating understanding of the nature of this regime and of the effects it has on the human beings living under it. Communism is for Patočka less *manifestly* evil than the Nazi regime, but not any better for it. If anything, the opposite is the case: while the manifest evils of Nazism make it manifestly intolerable to any respectable person, Communism is very adept at disguising its malice. First of all, it justifies itself by pointing toward the sins of others, playing upon their "bad conscience", and presenting itself as the solution to the evils of all previous regimes. The Communists claim that the evils of human life are essentially caused by the deficient regimes mankind has so far lived in, and that the key to "the future happiness of all" is a radical reshaping of the previous regimes to create a new, just, socialist society. The declared need for this radical reshaping and the (alleged) *bonum futurum* of a classless society to which the reshaping shall lead then serve as a smokescreen which hides the absolutely criminal means used to this end. The crimes of Communism thus remain (by and large) unbelieved by those who have not experienced them, whether because of their incompatibility with the noble ends to which they allegedly work and because those affected by these crimes were always presented by

[7] I use "Communism" as a shorthand for the absolute rule of the Communist party, the "leading role" of which had even been enshrined in the Czechoslovak Constitution from 1960 until 1989.

the Communists as persons inimical to those noble ends (i.e. they were branded as dangerous criminals), or, as Patočka points out, "due to [their] sheer incredibility".

But the Communists went even farther to hide their evils and preserve their noble appearance. They subjugated the language of their citizens (or rather: *subjects*) by making "thousands of […] changes" to it with the aim that "no one may understand that which is". The Communist rule imposes mandatory indoctrination on every single individual from an early age, and thereby the only way in which one learns to think about themselves is suffused with Communist ideological clichés. The indoctrinated subjects thus would not be able to arrive at truth about that which is, especially about their own lives – and that is the work of language under ordinary circumstances[8] – but only at "deception" useful to their rulers. The end result of these strategies is the destruction of human life on multiple levels: millions have been murdered or maimed by Communism for the sake of its "*bonum futurum*", thus being bereft of their bare lives; and virtually all others have been made to live not just in untruth (which is the element of ordinary human life – see Section 2 below), but in outright, officially mandated lie, thus being bereft of the possibility of living well. What makes this lie about who they are in which they are made to live and think fundamentally different from the more common kinds of untruth is that this lie robs those who live in it of the very awareness that there *could be* a life different and better from what they live right now *at all*.

Into this world and into this regime are transported our cosmonauts, the underground musicians. Patočka stresses that they are healthy human beings, of a sound body and a sound mind. But their health lies most fundamentally in the fact that, coming from elsewhere, they have not yet succumbed to the ruling lie. Hence they see that this is decidedly not "the best of all possible worlds", that a different and better life is possible. That they are able to see this at all is intolerable for the regime: the efficacy of the universal lie depends on it being universal and unchallenged, on nobody seeing what the musicians see. The regime therefore uses all the means at its disposal, all its carrots and sticks, in an attempt to coopt the musicians into the universal lie. They are promised petty pleasures, peace, and even a small share of power if they submit, and are threatened with persecution of themselves and their loved ones if they don't. Our musicians however cannot submit to the lie. They know that they themselves are responsible for living their own lives, that no one can either deprive them of this responsibility or solve the problem of living for them (as the Communist regime pretends to, parading itself in noble words of which it understands nothing). Their wish is not to challenge the regime, but to care for their own lives. And so they

[8] "Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. In ihrer Behausung wohnt der Mensch." (Heidegger 1976, 313)

continued living in their own way and playing their music, thereby incurring the wrath of the regime anyway.

The significance of their music in this story is twofold: for them and for others who enjoy it, it is a harmless pleasure fitting for a good life.[9] For the regime, however, their loud and dissonant music,[10] as well as their unorthodox lifestyles, are a most welcome piece of ammunition. Their lives, shaped by the desire not just to live well, but also to make it visible how different they are from the "decent people" (and thereby implicitly exposing the lie in which they live, as Patočka suggests at the end of the fourth paragraph of *On the Matters…*), make them repulsive to the said "decent people". They lack good manners, they dress unusually, they present strange and subversive ideas in their lyrics; they offend the public sensibility by almost everything they do. What happened to our musicians – their arrest and imprisonment for "hooliganism", which was basically the same as offending the public sensibility – seems almost inevitable in this light. The regime could – and did – easily present them as "disseminators of moral contagions" and "morbid phenomena" (to the extent that their affairs were presented to the public at all),[11] and the "decent people" wouldn't bat an eye; they would in fact be happy that these ugly sights have disappeared from their world ("they will appear *as the world wishes*" – emphasis added). But, as Patočka knows, this is merely an appearance, a fabricated slanderous image. The "decent people" are in fact lackeys of a criminal regime, and this already gives them no right to criticize our musicians. Worse, since their lives are ruled by the universal lie, they have no idea of what does it mean to live well. Their understanding of their lives is warped by the ruling lie, and they have no way of seeing what is worthwhile about the musicians' activity, and how the musicians live a better life than the "decent people" despite their unconventional lifestyles. All they see – all they *can* see – is a bunch of lowlifes who are "immoral" *and enjoy it*. What they cannot see is that their own "morality" and "decency" is but a self-

[9] "It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theatre, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another." (Spinoza, *Ethics* IV, P45, Scholium 2).

[10] Patočka himself was no fan of their music either – they "played a style of music that Patočka considered unlistenable" (Findlay 2002, 131).

[11] To give an example: the hugely popular 1970s TV series *The 30 Cases of Major Zeman*, which presented the Communist view of postwar history through criminal cases solved by the titular Major Zeman from 1945 to 1973, alluded to the case of the *Plastic People* in the episode "Mimikry" (first aired in 1978). Here, the members of a fictional underground band were portrayed as aimless drug addicts and criminals with no civic spirit, no sense of responsibility, and no loyalty even to each other. The episode ends with two of them hijacking a plane to take them to West Germany; one of the pilots of the plane is shot in the process by the musician-cum-hijacker, who is at the time also high on heroin.

serving justification of their comfortable petit-bourgeois existence in the service of the regime of the universal lie.

## 2. The fundamental reversal

The musicians have been tried and imprisoned at the end of the fifth paragraph of *On the Matters…*, which was their actual situation at the time of the writing of this essay. Our story ends now, inconclusively for the time being. But the essay does not end yet. Patočka returns at the beginning of the sixth paragraph to the fourth feature of *The Dream…* that he highlighted in the opening paragraph and wonders if the *outcome* of our story could against all odds also be a reversal of Dostoevsky. In order to understand what would be the reversal of the universal corruption effected by the Ridiculous Man, we have to take closer look at the story as *Patočka* understood it. It is no accident or mere ornament that *On the Matters…* is framed as a reversal of Dostoevsky's story, and only by grasping the logic of Patočka's reversal will we be able to understand what he is driving at here.

Patočka did produce a reading of *The Dream…* in an essay called *Kolem Masarykovy filosofie náboženství* [*Around Masaryk's Philosophy of Religion*] (2006d, 382–90). On this reading, the Ridiculous Man is a representative of an "underground" kind of life, i.e. decadent life which is aware of its own decadence. But unlike the Underground Man, he sees in his dream that an authentic life – life in truth – is possible, and this revelation shakes and awakens him. On the other hand, the authentic life is capable of falling into inauthenticity, as it indeed happens due to the influence of the Ridiculous Man, who unintentionally but irreversibly corrupted the authentically-living humans in his dream. Patočka analyzes this story as a meditation on the two basic modalities of human life that it showcases. Truth understood as "not any [particular] reality, but the key to *all of them*" (ibid., 385) is the element of the authentic life (hence: life in truth), and conversely, (particular) lies and (general) untruth are understood as the element of the inauthentic life. Patočka's reading proceeds in terms highly consistent with *On the Matters…*, and therefore I will leave the *Masaryk* essay aside and bring these elements out from this essay in the next section.

However, *On the Matters…* is not just another interpretation of *The Dream…*, but its *reversal*. Since the two ways of life present in both Patočka's reading of Dostoevsky's story and in his reversal of it are congruent with each other, the reversal is not a matter of a change in Patočka's thinking. It rather derives from a feature of *The Dream…* which Patočka does not discuss at all in the *Masaryk* essay: namely that it is a retelling of the biblical Fall. This is well established by the Ridiculous Man, the narrator of his own story. The inhabitants of the planet to which he is transported in his dream are clearly identified as pre-lapsarian humans, "unstained by the Fall" (Dostoevsky 1955, 311), who "dwelt in a

Garden of Eden just like the one in which our ancestors […] had once dwelt before they knew sin" (ibid.). They live in perfect harmony with each other as well as with the animals around them. And the teaching that the Ridiculous Man identifies as the source of their blessedness is "to love your neighbor as yourself" (ibid., 321).

The Fall in this story shares crucial features with its Biblical model. First, it captures the moment in which the human being has attained its present condition. This is said to be irreversible: even though the Ridiculous Man knows the truth now and is committed to spreading it, he admits that "I do not know how to establish a heaven on earth" (ibid., 321). And it doesn't seem as if he would ever find out, for, as Christians know, once man has fallen, he is fallen forever, at least in this world. Second, the present human condition is interpreted as one of inescapable misery. Third and most importantly, the Fall is related to the truth about who we as human beings are. This has been shown by Walter Bröcker, whose essay *Der Mythos vom Baum der Erkenntnis* is approvingly discussed by Patočka in *Plato and Europe* (Patočka 1999, 189–190; 2002, 47–48). Bröcker notes that the first consequence of the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge was *shame*, shame at one's nakedness (Gen. 3:7), and that "eben dadurch […] sind [die Menschen] nach Gottes eigenem Urteil geworden wie Gott" (Bröcker 1950, 39–40). Adam and Eve have ceased to be like animals and have become like God in that for them, "das beim Tier ineinander gebundene Auffassen und Deuten auseinander tritt; es wird voneinander frei" (ibid., 41). In other words, the eating of the forbidden fruit dramatizes the way in which the human being has become *Geist*, a free being. A free being is one for whom – unlike for an animal – the meanings of things it encounters in the world are not fixed beforehand, but who is free to interpret the meanings of things, and hence is free to act. However, he is not *completely* free; in particular is he not free from the rule of the sexual drive. And, says Bröcker "das Bewusstsein, nicht mehr Tier zu sein und doch dem tierischen Triebe noch gehorchen zu müssen, ist die Scham" (ibid.). Before becoming *Geist*, Adam and Eve's sexual drive acted itself out like that of other animals: "nicht in kindlicher, sondern in tierischer Unbefangenheit lebten die Menschen" (ibid., 37). But now the sexual drive becomes a source of shame for humans; its rule cannot be overcome, it can only be covered up, literally (by clothes) as well as figuratively (ibid., 42). Finally, God's punishments of Adam – the necessity of work, the awareness of death – are indistinguishable from the direct consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge, of having become *Geist* (ibid., 43). In this manner the myth explains the present situation of mankind as a consequence of our awareness of being the kind of being that we are (ibid., 48).

Bearing this in mind, let's take a closer look at Ridiculous Man's account of the corruption he effected on the pre-lapsarian humans:

> […] so did I infect with myself all that happy earth that knew no sin before me. They learnt to lie, and they grew to appreciate the beauty of a lie. Oh, perhaps, it all began *innocently*, with a jest, with a desire to show off, with amorous play, and perhaps indeed only with a germ, but this germ made its way into their hearts and they liked it. The voluptuousness was soon born, voluptuousness begot jealousy, and jealousy – cruelty… (Dostoevsky 1955, 316)

Their corruption then progressed until they have become like humans on our Earth. The Ridiculous Man presents this as the necessary consequence of lie, the supposed original corruption. However, it is worth noticing how he introduced them to lies: "with a desire to show off, with amorous play". The amorous play, or seduction, was done by one who had shame to one who was yet shameless, i.e. in an animal-like, unaware state. Being seduced is something altogether different from an animal's yielding to its sexual drive. Seduction addresses our sexual drive under the guise of addressing another of our interests. But our response to this advance is not purely "rational" (i.e. it isn't simply a response to the overt question, such as "Would you like to come up and see my etchings?"); we rather respond to it on the basis of our passions, of the attraction (or repulsion) we feel toward the seducer. In seduction, the seduced person's "reason", their capacity to think freely, is used as a means to provide a palatable pretext for yielding to the sexual drive. Thus being seduced shows us how deeply we are ruled by our animal drives despite our freedom, and how easy it is for our freedom to be enslaved by our drives. It shows us our "nakedness" and brings about the shame that the awareness of being naked means. It reveals to the seduced that they are *Geist*, a self-aware subject – and that they are ruled by their sexual drive even though they are not determined by it. Being seduced is for the pre-lapsarian humans in *The Dream…* tantamount to gaining the (self-)knowledge about the human way of being that constitutes the Fall. Hence, not the lie itself, but the "amorous play" which provided the occasion for the first lie is the true cause of the Fall.

The Fall is then understood in Dostoevsky's story, just as in its biblical model, ultimately as a matter of our self-knowledge – once we learn the truth about ourselves, about the kind of beings that we are, this truth hangs above us like a curse forever. What is once known cannot be un-known; fallen humanity has to remain fallen. The truth about man is deadly to man. Patočka is familiar with this kind of "deadly truth": it constitutes the core of what he calls "the mythical framework" in *Plato and Europe*. Myth, Patočka tells us, is a truthful articulation of the fundamental human predicament, of the fact that "man is a creature of the truth – which means of the phenomenon – and that this is his *damnation*" (Patočka 1999, 179; 2002, 35). Patočka sees this framework at work in the most influential myths of the past, such as the myth of Oedipus, the myth of Gilgamesh, or – indeed – the biblical myth of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. All these myths show human be-

ings as open – or rather *exposed* – to the truth which is overwhelmingly powerful in relation to them and which can at any moment overturn even the greatest apparent happiness into the greatest misery.

Truth holds this destructive power over human life because ordinary human access to it is accidental, haphazard, partial, and/or contradictory, and because our actions are based on this access. We act without truly knowing what it is that we do. In Patočka's words, "we are left to blind wandering" (Patočka 1999, 188; 2002, 45), our life originally *is* blind wandering over the course of which we have no real control.[12] Blind wandering means living in untruth while being exposed to the truth. As long as we blindly wander, it is always possible that our wrongdoings – which may be unwitting, but no less terrible because of that – will be revealed to us, and there is nothing we as blindly wandering beings can do to protect ourselves from this ever-present danger of unwittingly ruining our lives.

This is the lesson of the mythical world, in which there moreover is no way out of this predicament – myth understands human beings *as* blindly wandering beings. The solution offered by the mythical framework is a sharp division of the world into two separate realms, that of the "Day", in which human beings work and try to protect the transitory goods of their lives, and that of the "Night", the realm of the terrifying and destructive phenomena which always lurk just beyond the limits of the cultivated world (Patočka 1999, 187 and 196; 2002, 44 and 54).[13] But even though our worlds are in many ways very different from the mythical world, the mythical framework is not a thing of a distant past, but very much alive: we, here and now, are still in a way within the mythical framework and live exposed to the terrible power of the truth (Patočka 1999, 186; 2002, 43). Truth is the supreme human predicament as long as we blindly wander.

But how is it possible *not* to blindly wander? That question, according to Patočka, was a central concern of Greek philosophy. The mythical framework, being an expression of the supreme human predicament, was something the Greek philosophers were acutely aware of – and something they found the way out of. Patočka summarizes this foundational element of Greek thought as follows:

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[12] "Blind wandering" translates *bloudění*, the Czech equivalent of the German *Irren*, which Heidegger names as one of the primary forms of untruth in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (Heidegger 1976, 196–198).

[13] It is interesting to trace the parallels between the "Day" of the mythical framework and the "Day" as discussed in the sixth of the *Heretical Essays*. The Force readily coopts the mythical framework of Day and Night; Day becomes the rational calculation of everything as resources to be efficiently deployed. The blind wandering characteristic of mythically living humans is thereby deepened. And Night, the shaking of all the meanings that Day arrogates to itself, becomes the way out of this domination and false determination of the human being by the metaphysics of the Force, as we read in the sixth of the *Heretical Essays*. No wonder that *this* Day should be terrified of its Night.

> The greatness – that which made Greek philosophy what it is and that which made it the foundation of all of European life – is that from [this predicament] Greek philosophy developed *a plan for life*, that it understood [this predicament] not as a curse, but as *human greatness*! Of course, only under certain circumstances: only if we make this clarity, the phenomenon as such, the phenomenalization of the world, the placing into clarity – the program of the entire human life. (Patočka 1999, 180; 2002, 35; translation amended)

And the finitude of human life is not a problem for this "plan for life", since it does not bear on our ability to understand the truth of the phenomenon:

> [Since] the phenomenon and its lawful ordering is at the very roots of the entire universe, man does not fare any worse than a being which would have the entire universe in its power – so long as he systematically pursues the phenomenon as such. Human life differs from the life of the gods only in its quantitative dimension, but not in its essence: *that is the solution of Greek philosophy*. (Patočka 1999, 180; 2002, 36; emphasis added)

The great achievement of Greek philosophy was the working out of a new way of life that constitutes the overcoming of life as blind wandering. Here too the human being is understood as a being essentially open to the truth, but this openness may become the greatest blessing if one undertakes to live according to it. This way of life, which Patočka calls by the Platonic word "care for the soul" (*τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπιμελεῖσθαι*), consists in a ceaseless conscious effort at working out the human essence and leading one's life according to it. It is the life of the thinker led in the explicit awareness of human openness to the truth and in a constant effort to live in accordance with the truth by examining one's opinions and thus arriving at the coherent, simply true speech (Patočka 1999, 230; 2002, 92). It is an effort to understand things as what they are rather than according to the practical use we can make of them, to understand the whole in which we encounter all things, and so – most importantly – to understand what the human being is and what its place in the whole is.

Care for the soul was the first version of the life in truth. Patočka stresses two features of the care for the soul: first, it is the *attitude* of the knower rather than the state of having attained the desired knowledge (ibid.). Hence, philosophy is *love of wisdom* rather than attained wisdom. Second, it is a "philosophical ideal that *does not depend* on a particular philosophic view" (Patočka 1999, 230; 2002, 93); it is not the Platonic way of life, but rather the philosophic way of life as such. The rightness of this way of life lies in the fact that from this perspective alone is it possible to live without fear of the truth and protected, not from the unpleasant accidents of life, but from the risk that one lives fundamentally in the wrong. It is a kind of awakening from the unreflected, ordinary human condition of which myth is a truthful expression, into (the possibility of) the condition of true happiness

which consists in reflection and which effects the unity of one's soul and the awareness of one's place within the whole. For one who is able to live in this way, the human essence comes to be understood as a blessing rather than as a curse; the world ceases being divided into day and night, and becomes a single whole; and one comes to understand their place within this whole and so no longer blindly wanders. Only for one who practices life in truth (whether as care for the soul, or in a different form) can truth be a "friend", as Aristotle is said to have put it, rather than something to be afraid of or an instrument in the struggle for power. The Greek discovery of life in truth is the most fundamental reversal of the human condition that has ever been enacted.

I believe that by presenting the musicians' story as a reversal of *The Dream…*, Patočka hints that the musicians are enacting precisely this kind of reversal. In our world, there are originally no unfallen humans; we are born as, and live with, fallen humans. The musicians too have begun as "fallen", blindly wandering humans, but they have managed to raise themselves up to a life truer than that of succumbing to the ruling lie. And their example has the effect of raising others up as well. Hence, Patočka's story reverses also the outcome of Dostoevsky's story, and this is the most fundamental way of reversing it. While in *The Dream…* a fallen man irreversibly drags others down to his fallen state, in our story the musicians who strive to live in truth are able to raise others up to their level, or at least to show them the way there. They make the truth a blessing instead of a curse. But how do the musicians do this? Why does Patočka see *them*, of all people, as enacting this fundamental reversal? After all, they were not known for having produced any great works of thought. What did their way of living in truth consist of? What did they *know*? More radically, what did they know that a man like Patočka did *not* know?

## 3. The two ways of life

We have in fact already read, in the fourth paragraph of *On the Matters…*, what the saving knowledge brought to Patočka and us by the musicians is: it is the knowledge that each of us has an "inalienable responsibility" for the leading of our own life. This suggests that responsibility is in an important way *the* alternative to the Communist lie, as well as to life in untruth in general. To understand how this is the case, and what does responsibility entail, I will now take a closer look at the fifth of the *Heretical Essays*, where life in truth is discussed through the phenomenon of responsibility.

Responsibility is introduced here as the criterion for judging whether a life is decadent or not, inauthentic or authentic (Patočka 2002a, 99; 1996, 97). Patočka begins from our perception of life as a burden, as something difficult to carry – both in the sense of the

difficult labor we have to carry out in order to provide the material necessities of survival,[14] and in the sense of the difficult choices life forces upon us. In other words, human beings cannot simply be, but have to *lead* their lives (Patočka 2002a, 100; 1996, 98); in Heidegger's phrase, they have to take care of their own being. A responsible life is one that *responds* to this character that human life possesses: it is taking care of our own life "in the sense that we truly bear it, that we identify with its burden." (ibid.) It is a life led in awareness of and in accordance with the truth about its own essence, *life in truth*. On the other hand, an untrue, inauthentic life is characterized by an avoidance of the problematic character of human life, most clearly visible in various modern attempts (such as Communism) to resolve the problematic by external means: it is "avoidance, escape, deviation into inauthenticity and relief." (ibid.)

Patočka then brings out three basic features of the responsible life. It entails first of all leading *my own* life in its particularity and in its irreplaceability: it means doing "what no one else can do in my place" (Derrida 1995, 44). In *On the Matters…* Patočka also tells us that responsibility means "doing what *I* have to do" (emphasis added), I as the particular individual that I am in my particular situation. Second, it is "*doing* what I have to do"; it is the *activity* of leading one's own life, "involvement in action, doing, a *praxis*" (Derrida 1995, 25). If we are to live responsibly, we have to consciously face the difficulties life brings with itself and take them upon ourselves rather than try to avoid them in one way or another. Third, if I am to do what I have to do, I have to *know* what it is that I have to do. The responsible life hence requires "explicit clarity about the mode of being of the responsible beings that humans are" (Patočka 2002a, 103; 1996, 101). This clarity consists in knowing that the specifically human mode of being is relation to our own being (*Heretical Essays* 114/116), the fact that our life isn't something simply given to us but has to be led: in other words, it is the understanding of ourselves as responsible for the way we live, and the understanding of the possible ways of human life. The element of clarity points back to the Platonic "care for the soul" and shows us why it is the original form of responsible life. The responsible life is then essentially the same as life in truth; they are two sides of the same coin. The truth about the human way of being is no mere abstract proposition, but entails the injunction to strive living according to it, i.e. to live responsibly. And conversely, the awareness of responsibility for our life issues from an understanding of this characteristic of human life. As we have seen, for Patočka there are two fundamental ways of life: the life of blind wandering, of inauthenticity and escaping the call to care for our own life by attempting to relegate our responsibility to someone or something else; and the life that cares for itself, that responds to the essential need to lead our lives and strives to attain

[14] "Work is always forced labor" (Patočka 2002a, 101; 1996, 99).

clarity about it as much as possible, life oriented on the truth about human life. To summarize: living responsibly means leading one's life in the full awareness of what this leading demands from us, both as human beings and from us in our particularity.

In the history of Europe, responsibility has taken on two main forms so far: the Platonic and the Christian, which for all their differences are best understood as two renewals of the same fundamental idea rather than as something essentially different.[15] Such periodic renewals of the thought of responsibility are necessary for it to perpetuate itself. In fact *every single person* that comes to understand themselves as responsible for leading their own life makes a kind of renewal for themselves, for responsibility has to be won for oneself by one's own effort rather than learned from others (as discursive knowledge is).[16] What the musicians did in refusing to succumb to the Communist lie and in taking up the responsibility for leading their lives despite the consequences they had to face for it is then no "ineffectual posturing", as Kohák (1989, 130) dismissively describes the underground. It is rather something deserving of the highest praise. If we understand the story of our musicians as another renewal of the thought of responsibility in the midst of a regime dedicated to stamping it out, we can see it (as a whole) as a final reversal of *The Dream…*: the story of our musicians as told to us by Patočka is no "fantastic story" (the subtitle of *The Dream…*), but a truthful account of the typical interaction between the two basic modalities of the human life.

Patočka's remark in *On the Matters…* that the musicians discovered their souls "in this contrast [between the life in truth and the life in the Communist lie]" is an expression of the transformative character that the thought of responsibility has on those who accept it. Once we assume the responsibility for our life and strive to live in truth, we come to see 1) that this is a fundamentally different way of life from the life of inauthenticity and blind wandering, 2) that these are the two basic alternatives that stand before human beings, and 3) that the difference between them lies in understanding the nature of our existence.

[15] Derrida's reading of the fifth *Heretical Essay* in *The Gift of Death* is very rich and insightful, although I believe his arguments as to why responsibility is not fully attainable miss the nerve of Patočka's understanding of it. Taking up responsibility for one's own life has a profoundly transformative effect even if it's not fully realized. In this it is analogous with the Platonic care for the soul, whose ostensible goal – the coherent speech about the whole – is strictly speaking unattainable. As I argued above, it nevertheless has a real, attainable effect: the attitude of openness to the truth and of ceaseless questioning of one's opinions. Patočka understands philosophic activity precisely as this attitude which has to be periodically renewed: "*We have to say that which is, again, over and over, and always in a different way, but it always has to be the same thing!*" (Patočka 1999, 229; 2002, 90; emphasis original, translation amended). In fairness to Derrida, I agree with Findlay (2002, 197) that "Derrida is […] not searching for Patočka's or Kierkegaard's concept of responsibility as much as for his own."

[16] "Whatever one generation learns from another, no generation learns the essentially human from a previous one" (Kierkegaard 1983, 121).

Patočka speaks of the "soul" here because he understood our existence in terms of three fundamental movements and because he took up the Greek notion of the soul as the principle of motion.[17] Tucker suggests that "soul" is for Patočka a similar kind of determination of the human being as *Dasein* is for Heidegger, for both of them have to be discovered by rising up to the task of taking care of our own being. Insofar as the discovery of the two ways of life is tied up with clarity about the specifically human mode of being, it does entail the discovery of one's soul in Patočka's meaning of the word (see Tucker 2000, 118).

But even though our musicians may have been leading their lives responsibly, it seems hardly possible that they, a small group without any access to media, would be able to spread the thought of responsibility against the will of the Communist regime with all the resources it had available to suppress them. After all, we know that the musicians have been imprisoned and we have seen what image was assigned to them by the Communists. Patočka acknowledges that this seems highly improbable in saying that it would take "magic" to accomplish it; but he nevertheless thinks it to be possible. In one sense, the "magic" is precisely the immense power of attraction which the thought of responsibility has and which allows it to propagate itself despite the huge resistance on part of the powers that be. From the Communists' perspective, this power is simply incomprehensible, coming from nowhere, and thus "magical" or, as it were, supernatural (or they understand it as the work of their enemies from the other side of the Iron Curtain). However, for those who have taken up responsibility for their own lives, the "magic" is something altogether different, namely a way of expressing the wonder that the understanding of oneself as responsible for leading one's own life naturally arouses. This "magic" being inherent in the essential human possibility of life in truth, it is indeed something on which the human being is "directed" and in which it "[doesn't] cease to believe."

In the seventh paragraph of *On the Matters…* we finally learn why Patočka chose to speak of the musicians as if they were beings from another galaxy. The reason for this is twofold and has nothing to do with a wish to accommodate himself to the structure of *The Dream…*, which he has reversed so thoroughly. First, it has to do with their nature as young people. Being young, they are thrown into life and "begin life anew", literally as well as figuratively – by their great sensitivity to what is wrong with the established forms of life, with the compromises and routines in which we tend to get "mired" as we grow older, and by being prone to reject them on grounds of their inauthenticity or wrongness.[18] For them,

[17] See e.g. *The "Natural" World and Phenomenology* in Kohák 1989, or *Plato and Europe* 320/187.

[18] Patočka agrees on the subject of youth with Nietzsche, according to whom "Der Mensch, welcher nicht zur Masse gehören will, braucht nur aufzuhören, gegen sich bequem zu sein; er folge seinem Gewissen, welches ihm zuruft: "sei du selbst! Das bist du alles nicht, was du jetzt tust, meinst, begehrst." Jede junge Seele hört diesen Zuruf bei Tag und bei Nacht und erzittert dabei" (Nietzsche

thrown here, the conventions of our way of life are strange and clearly wrong in countless ways, as they would be for enlightened aliens from a science fiction story. This capacity of youth, its specific gift, is universally and inalienably human, no matter how hard the Communists or anyone else may try to suppress it, as Patočka points out by saying that "the story of our cosmonauts can happen anytime and anywhere". Patočka's second reason goes even further than this: the musicians are not just guests thrown into the life we older humans have prepared for them – they are *cosmonauts*. A "cosmonaut" is here not simply the Communist equivalent of "astronaut": it is another way of expressing the essential character of human life. We all, whether we know it or not, whether we act like it or fail to do so, sail through the *kosmos* and seek a way of navigating it, a clarity about what our life is and what it asks from us. And as we have seen, our musicians have been performing this essentially – but by no means *universally* – human activity of seeking clarity and living in truth with remarkable success.

Patočka calls this beginning-life-anew a "grace" and says that although our musicians' approach to the responsible life has been mostly negative – pointing out what is wrong with the current practices rather than offering better practices in their stead – they are not to be blamed for it, for such is the nature of youth. Their way of living responsibly is as of now insufficient, but therefore not yet without value; it is a first step in the right direction; it already partakes in the attitude of living in truth. The "true approach" to this grace is to embrace it, to listen to their criticisms and use them to revise and improve our own practices. Their struggle is Patočka's own struggle, the struggle for life in truth and against relief, and to take part in this struggle alongside others who see the importance of this struggle too is for him the greatest joy, as his rhetorical question at the end of the seventh paragraph of *On the Matters…* makes clear. After all, this story could happen "anytime and anywhere": what our musicians did in Communist Czechoslovakia – namely, demonstrated by deed what leading a responsible life means here and now – was and will be done by others at other times and places. Their example led Patočka himself to reconsider his own practice of responsibility and "to do what I have to do", which he came to understand as publicly stepping up in their defense not merely because they were persecuted but because they were persecuted for attempting to live the life which alone is fitting for a human being. They have taught him to step up in the defense of life in truth when its very possibility is under attack. The example of their fearless resistance to the ruling lie in the face of the

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1999, 1.338). Both Nietzsche's and Patočka's understanding of youth emphasizes their capacity to recognize the wrong or the untrue even without knowing the good or the true, and identifies the former in being comfortable, in unwarranted relief of one's responsibility for one's life.

Patočka also appears to echo Hannah Arendt's famous sentence: "With each new birth, a new beginning is born into the world, a new world has potentially come into being." (Arendt 1953, 311)

powers that be has awakened Patočka's conscience, just as he was trying to awaken the consciences of his compatriots by relating them the story of our musicians as he understood it (that is, by writing *On the Matters…*), and by his engagement as the Charter 77 spokesperson in general.

In the final paragraph of *On the Matters…* Patočka once again stresses the irreplaceably and inalienably personal dimension of the responsible life. No one can take away from our musicians their way of life – only they themselves can give up on it, and this risk is ever-present to us as human beings (as it happened in *The Dream…*). Only on them depends which of the two ways of life they will choose – whether the life in truth, responsibility, and care for their souls, or the life of blind wandering (or lie), relief, and care for dominating the world.[19] In so far as these are the two fundamental alternatives of human life, we all, as human beings, are faced with the same choice. As Patočka says, "they themselves will write, will finish writing the anti-story to Dostoevsky's story" – and the same is true of *our own* stories.

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I hope to have brought out the great richness hidden in this unassuming little essay. Its principal subject is life in truth, the properly human way of life as Patočka understands it. Life in truth is the leading of one's life in the awareness of the nature of human life as something which we have to actively take care of, something we have to take care of *well* – i.e. with the effort to attain the greatest possible clarity both about human life as such and its good, and about the particular situation of my own life and its requirements. It is a life which one strives to lead on the basis of truth, which takes truth as the highest and only criterion of action. In short, it is "*doing* what *I* have to do," with the silent addendum that no effort is to be spared at *knowing* what I have to do. And that is no pastime of an ivory-tower intellectual, for, as Patočka said (and as he *did*), it is rather "the only real help and care for the other".

In this light it becomes clear why, in contrast with the "public" Charter 77 essays, the core of Patočka's argument here is decidedly not morality or human rights, the *raison d'être* of Charter 77. This essay is rather an articulation of that for the sake of which it is

[19] That is the name which Patočka gives in *Plato and Europe* (228/89) to the ultimate outcome of the tendency of the inauthentic life to bend things and other human beings according to its desires, the opposite of which is the tendency of life in truth to "let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying its own being and its own nature to it" (Patočka 2002, 100; 1996, 98). This distinctly echoes Heidegger's definition of love (see Heidegger 1976, 316), and Patočka elaborates on this understanding of love in the *Masaryk* essay (Patočka 2006d, 388).

important that human rights be observed. There is a strong continuity in Patočka's view of the human good as life in truth that persists throughout the different articulations of *Plato and Europe*, the *Heretical Essays*, and of his other mature writings, and *On the Matters…* shows how his commitment to life in truth is the foundation of his defense of human rights by engaging in Charter 77. Thus, I also disagree with Rorty's judgment that "Patočka's conscience led him to do the right thing, but he did not supply good philosophical reasons for doing what he did" (1991, 37). Patočka indeed did not provide a "firm philosophical foundation" (ibid.) to democracy and human rights. That is because his defense of them is instrumental rather than substantial. They are only historically contingent juridical constructs rather than substantial goods, but they offer the space and opportunity for those who seek to live in truth to do so. Life in truth has to be attained by overcoming blind wandering – it has to be aware of its counterpart, of the falsity below it that it may fall into. And the blind wandering of a democratic society can be overcome without one's life being destroyed in the process, which was not possible under the rule of the Communist lie. In short, the goodness of democracy and human rights lies for Patočka in their being (at least in comparison with the relevant alternatives) good conditions for the substantial human good that life in truth is.[20]

We can now answer the question of what made Patočka become a spokesperson for Charter 77. His reasons for this step were twofold. First of them is his assessment of the nature of the Communist regime, so "heretical" that it could not be stated directly even in a private text; even here it needs to remain hidden behind allegory and reversal. Communism is understood by Patočka as the regime of the universal lie that uses all its power to make life in truth unthinkable; it is a truly *inhuman* regime because it denies that which is essential to being human. This assessment of the evils of Communism, founded upon substantial philosophical (rather than merely political or economic) grounds, has no parallel that I know of. The second reason ties in directly to the first one. Living in such a regime, the best

[20] It is true that Patočka argues that not just Communism, but modern technological civilization as such is decadent, since it has made the possibility of living the responsible life even more difficult than it was before, and since it has led to the rule of the Force over human life (Patočka 2002a, 115; 1996, 117). However, he does not follow Heidegger (1983, 40–41) in seeing a metaphysical equivalence between Communism and Americanism or modern technological civilization in general. Patočka would reply to Heidegger that although modern technological civilization fosters life in untruth, untruth has always been the element of ordinary human life, and life in untruth is essentially different from life in the lie in that life in mere untruth contains the possibility of rising above the untruth and does not deny and violently suppress it. Unlike Communism, technological civilization has not declared itself to be the truly human life, it did not strive to make other ways of life literally unthinkable, and it did not mete out furious and draconic punishments to those who refused its way of life. The difference between Americanism and Communism is for Patočka the difference between life in untruth and life in the lie.

Patočka could do was to step up publicly and do his utmost to counteract this pernicious tendency of Communism. Contrary to Tucker's view (2000, 87), Patočka's political engagement was not for the sake of "absolute" human rights, nor was it *merely* an act of "assuming the responsibility of free citizens", as Kohák (1989, 131) thinks. It was rather the final fruit of his lifelong striving to live in the best possible, truthful and *clear* way – to live the properly human life, which is the only true good and the only true happiness. The young underground musicians, with their capacity to recognize the evils of Communism and with their passionate opposition against them, showed Patočka by their example what does it mean to *lead* life in truth there and then, under the rule of the Communist lie. They have improved his understanding of what *he* had to do – which for him meant to stand up publicly in defense of the musicians and of life in truth itself when the very possibility of this substantial human good was endangered by the powers that be.

For us Patočka is an example to rise up to, but not one to imitate – *we* have to lead our lives ourselves and find out what life in truth means and asks from us here and now (as Patočka stresses throughout *On the Matters…*). Patočka himself, by reconsidering his own way of living in truth and by defending its possibility even at the cost of his own life decisively proved his adherence to it in its strongest form (in its *true* form), expressed by the Socratic dictum that "the most important thing is not life, but the good life" (Plato, *Crito* 48b).

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