

Jan Patočka's Project of an Asubjective Phenomenology

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The paper gives a short review of Patočka's personal contacts with Husserl and reviews his position within the phenomenological movement by explaining what sort of criticism on Husserl Patočka develops in his own concept of an "asubjective" phenomenology.

Introduction

As the title of Patočka's project indicates the task in question here is to disengage philosophical thought from the vestiges of traditional Cartesian subjectivism. Patočka sees this Cartesianism not only in philosophy but in the self-understanding of the whole of modern technical civilization.

Let us first briefly recall what Cartesian subjectivism is all about. Descartes' *ego cogito, ergo sum* is a statement which is absolutely certain. It cannot be refuted. Its certainty lies in the fact that the content of its assertion is immediately evident. Whatever I think—however uncertain, vague or absurd it may be—the certainty that, in thinking it, *I am* is indubitable. This knowledge depends on nothing else, I draw it directly from myself; it is, as Plato would have said—and as Patočka reminds us in one of his last finished texts, "Cartesianism and Phenomenology"¹—a *mathēma*. In the same passage, Patočka stresses that the significance of this corner-stone of modern rationality is not simply that it offers "a model of all certitude" but also and above all that it is the starting point of the mode of thinking "for which certitude is the very essence of truth, identical with it".²

It is interesting that Descartes' principle has "a peculiar ambiguity" about it, "consisting in its being the starting point of both modern subjectivism and [the] mathematical objectivism"³ which has not only triumphed in physics but has become a model for the scientisation of all other branches of human knowledge.⁴

Descartes' next step is to ask what is the ego which draws from its *cogito* the certainty of its own being, and he answers logically that it is a *res cogitans*. He then concludes that everything that is not a *res cogitans* is necessarily a *res extensa*. This spatial determination of things has the advantage of being totally universal. It covers all material things and renders superfluous the need to take into account the more specific traits which distinguish them from one another and, according to Descartes, are all fraught with the possibility of delusion. A much greater advantage is, however, that spatial determinations are a sphere of possible idealization which can be handled with the same certainty discovered in reflecting on the *cogito*. Idealized spatial determinations are objects of geometry, and as both Plato and Kant have shown, geometrical knowledge is drawn from within us, it is a *mathēma*. Everything that can be reduced to spatial determinations is mathematisable: "coming to understand spatial relations is what opens our access to things...as capable of being

¹ Jan Patočka, "Karteziánství a fenomenologie" (1976), in *Sebrané spisy*, vol. 7: *Fenomenologické spisy II*, ed. P. Kouba and O. Švec, Prague: Oikoymenth, 2009, 461: "Jistota *Cogito* předchází zajisté všechny ostatní; je to však nicméně jistota matematická, protože nepřichází 'zvenčí,' zjišťuje se v samotné, čisté reflexi".—See English translation by E. Kohák, "Cartesianism and Phenomenology", in *Jan Patočka. Philosophy and Selected Writings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 292: "The certitude of the *cogito* precedes all others, surely; it is, however, a mathematical certitude nonetheless, because it does not come from 'without' but rather is ascertained in pure reflection".

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 458-9; Eng. trans., 290.

construed and calculated. To construe and calculate means at the same time to predict".⁵ The objectivism of the tendency toward mathematisation that asserts itself in all disciplines is thus, in last resort, founded subjectively.

It is easier to understand how modern subjectivism in philosophy stems from Descartes' certainty. Let us consider how Edmund Husserl succumbed to subjectivism and how this circumstance brought Jan Patočka to his idea of asubjective phenomenology.

Patočka first met Husserl and his philosophy while working on his doctoral thesis on stipend in Paris in 1928. Husserl, recently emeritus, was invited at the same time to hold in Paris a series of lectures summing up his philosophical work. (The lectures were initially published in Emmanuel Levinas' French translation under the title *Méditations cartésiennes*.) It was then that Patočka definitely chose phenomenology.

His second meeting with Husserl was not matter of chance. In the academic year 1932/33, he was awarded a Humboldt Foundation scholarship and studied first in Berlin, then in Freiburg, where Husserl greeted in him his only fellow countryman to show interest in phenomenology. (Husserl's native town of Prostějov, or Prossnitz, is part of the same country as Patočka's Prague.) Officially, of course, Patočka had to enrol in Martin Heidegger's philosophy courses (at the time of his rectorship and compromise with National Socialism). The experience reaped during this year in Germany was extremely rich. Patočka not only witnessed Hitler's coming to power but personally met both of the philosophical titans who were to determine his own work. He also struck up a life-long friendship with yet a third great figure of twentieth century philosophy, Husserl's then assistant, Eugen Fink, only two years his senior.

Patočka was then preparing his Habilitation thesis on the "natural world". Immersed in the detailed study of Husserl's phenomenology, he also began to become acquainted with its critics. The most outstanding among them was, of course, Heidegger, though Patočka in the 1930s did not yet fully appreciate his critique. That was to come later. But in studying the problems of the *Lebenswelt*, he acquired a basis enabling him to take an active part in constructive criticism of Husserl.

Basically, neither Patočka nor Heidegger set out to refute Husserl's phenomenology. What they wanted was to distinguish and grasp the guiding idea thanks to which Husserl succeeded in opening up an entirely new and extremely fertile horizon for philosophy, and to identify the points in Husserl where he was—in good faith—unfaithful to his original project. And then, of course, to suggest and work out an alternative solution to the ensuing problems. Heidegger's grandiose attempt is now nearly completely available in the impressively long series of volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*. It is, however, no easy reading and many believe that Heidegger, in time, betrayed Husserl's project. Patočka, too, was partly of this opinion. Nonetheless, he took Heidegger's philosophy extremely seriously, drew considerable inspiration from it, and set out to amend it as well as Husserl's.

"Husserl's phenomenology claimed to be a new beginning in philosophy", states Patočka at the outset of his 1969/70 lectures on phenomenology at Charles University in Prague, "it was meant from the start to be an entirely new mode of empiricism in philosophy".⁶ Why empiricism?—Husserl was a mathematician by training. He had a sense of precision and an aversion to fantastic philosophical speculations. He wanted to build solely on what he could really see, what presented itself to his eye in genuine, live experience. He was used to this from mathematics. In mathematics we cannot accept as true anything that we do not directly see—see, of course, with the mind's eye, with the eye of the soul.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 460; Eng. trans., 292.

⁶ Jan Patočka, *Úvod do Fenomenologické Filosofie*, ed. Jiří Polívka and Ivan Chvatík (Praha: ISE, Oikoyomenh, Edice Oikúmené, ve spolupráci s Archivem Jana Patočky, 1993), 5.

This is why Husserl, from the very start, had to broaden the concept of experience from the sensual sphere, in which we encounter individual things, to what he calls the *categorial* sphere, where we experience universals, generalities. He was, of course, obliged to distinguish here two kinds of generality. One is obtained by generalization from many experiences of particulars, the other by considering and analysing one single case. The first kind is called *empirical generality*; it is, of course, hypothetical—there can always appear a black swan that will abolish the universality of the white swans. Husserl calls the second kind of generality *eidetic*: what we *see* in a thing as valid for all things of the same kind is *eidos*, the general aspect; it obtains necessarily—not hypothetically—of all relevant particulars. It is, once again, a kind of *mathēma*.

Only after this broadening is it possible to understand Husserl's "principle of all principles" which phenomenology is supposed to respect:

every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition...everything originally (so to speak in its 'personal' actuality) offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.⁷

What comes into play here is a difference we are familiar with from everyday experience, and whose importance already caught Plato's attention, namely, the difference between empty meaning and its fulfilment. It is clear that this difference makes itself felt both in the sensual and in the categorial sphere. And it is the main factor which led Husserl to the above-mentioned broadening of the concept of experience.

Of course, things are not as simple as they may seem in this brief account. In reality, the task set here involves the questions: What is experience? What are its domains? What is its lawful structure? How does experience in general become possible?

Experience is always experience with or of something. For experience to be experience this something must somehow be given to us, as stated in the principle of principles; we cannot just dream it up. Something must appear, manifest itself to us. To ask what is experience is thus to ask how things are given, how they manifest themselves to us. The study of appearance as such, of manifestation, of the phenomenon—such is the task of phenomenology.

This, of course, requires a method. For Husserl, as we all know, the method is that of phenomenological reduction followed by constitution. Patočka recounts in detail the history of the birth of the idea of reduction and constitution in the essay "Epochē and Reduction".⁸ In a first approximation, Husserl means to exploit Descartes' doubts about the possibility of acquiring knowledge of the outside world, as opposed to the certainty of our *cogito*, our thinking, and, consequently, our *cogitationes*, our thoughts. Leaving aside the problematicity of "transcendent content" (what we want to know about the things of the world in the naïve attitude), we shall study rather our *thoughts* about these transcendent things. We reduce transcendent content to how it appears in our *cogitationes*—this is what Husserl calls reduction. And that once done, we will be able to study how our experience is built in these *cogitationes*—this is constitution. According to Husserl, our thoughts are immediately at our disposal; they are given to us directly as such, we have but to take notice of them, to direct our attention at them in reflection. Husserl thus reduces the transcendence of things of the world to absolute self-presence in the immanence of consciousness. This is a lived-experiential structure given in original, so that it is possible to apply to it the principle of all principles. And, as we do not have original access to anything other than this

⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch*, ed. K. Schuhmann, Husserliana III/1, The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1976, § 24, 43. Cf. English translation by Fred Kersten, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998, 44.

⁸ Jan Patočka, "Epoché und Reduktion. Einige Bemerkungen" (1975), in *Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz*, ed. K. Nellen, J. Němec and I. Srubar, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991, 415-23.

structure, Husserl claims that the whole of the reduced world is founded in the accomplishments of consciousness which, in this sense, precedes the world.⁹

We would now expect him to do something like Kant, i.e., to show by his own means how what we understand as a *transcendent, independent object* is constructed in our subjective accomplishments. But this Husserl does not do. He does not want to repeat Kant's procedure and logically construe what the synthetic activities of the subject must be like in order to result, as Kant says, in objective reality, in "the production of phenomenal objects for us".¹⁰ Husserl studies only "factually observed eidetic structures"¹¹ and finds in immanent self-giveness indications of two different modes of being. One is the mode of being of lived-experience, which, as we have seen, is directly accessible in original; the other is the mode of being of reality, which "presents itself always only one-sidedly and incompletely through a certain stratum of lived-experience, the 'hyletic data.'"¹²

Patočka takes up here an objection formulated by others before him, namely, that this ontology "presupposes reflection as an immediate act of self-apprehension without accounting for its possibility".¹³ What does this mean? What exactly is disputed here? Not that we apprehend in reflection our lived-experiences. These are guaranteed by the Cartesian starting point. What is questionable is the presupposition that, in apprehending these lived-experiences, I apprehend myself as experiencing, that my apprehension is self-apprehension. To put it differently, the self-certainty of my lived-experiencing, the *cogito ergo sum*, the certainty of the fact *that* I experience and, therefore, am, is taken as the certainty of immediate access to *what* I am qua experiencing, how I experience my experiencing. This implies, of course, an infinite regress: I experience that I experience that I experience... It can be seen as a vestige of Cartesianism. The experiencing ego is understood as a thing, as a *res cogitans*, which—unlike a *res extensa*—can be adequately viewed, in pure evidence. It is supposed to be the ultimate, absolute ground, on which alone true knowledge can be erected.

Another Husserlian motif is connected with this, namely, the motif of *epochē*. The term was introduced as early as 1907, in the five lectures published under the title *The Idea of Phenomenology*, as complementary to the motif of reduction to the immanence of consciousness: if we want to "know scientifically...what is knowledge", we cannot let any pre-given knowledge obtain, we cannot "accept any being as pre-given"—except, of course, those that are absolutely certain, i.e., our own *cogitationes*.¹⁴ The concept of the *general positing*¹⁵ of the world was first introduced in the *Ideen I*. It means the positing that we automatically accomplish in the natural attitude, the positing of the facts and things of the surrounding world, i.e., their apprehension as "factually existent actuality". Only here, in the *Ideen I*, is "*epochē*" explicitly distinguished from "reduction" and it now means to abstain from this positing: "while it in itself remains what it is, we, so to speak, 'put it out of action,' we 'exclude it,' we 'parenthesize it.'"¹⁶ We do not make use of the belief that these things of the natural attitude are transcendent beings, without thereby in the least losing sight of their content. The content remains valid. Nevertheless, according to Husserl, we cannot perform this parenthesizing universally, because we would then exclude from being "the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁰ Patočka, *Úvod*, 72.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹² Patočka, "Epoché und Reduktion", 420.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, ed. W. Biemel, Husserliana II, The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1950, 29-30, Cf. English translation: Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology: A Translation of Die Idee der Phänomenologie. Husserliana II*, trans. Lee Hardy, Edmund Husserl: Collected Works. Volume VIII (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 22-23.

¹⁵ Husserl, *Ideen I*, § 30, 53; Eng. trans., 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, § 31, 54; Eng. trans., 59.

whole world, including ourselves with all our *cogitare*”.¹⁷ This, of course, Husserl cannot admit. By doing this, he would lose the above-mentioned absolutely existent ground of all knowledge. Therefore, *epochē* must be limited: “consciousness has, in itself, a being of its own which, in its own absolute essence, is not touched by the phenomenological exclusion”.¹⁸

However, once he refuses the possibility of an absolute reflection which could study this absolute ground of consciousness in original, Patočka must also refuse the limitation of *epochē* demanded by Husserl. He is now determined to perform the *epochē* in a truly universal manner, so as to include lived-experiencing itself. In consequence, we no longer believe that the reflection of our lived-experiences gives us access to our actual experiencing. Only then does it become possible to fully thematise what Husserl originally had in view, namely, how anything at all, *including ourselves*, appears.

This “including ourselves” is important. As long as Husserl supposed that we and our experiencing are immediately accessible in reflection, this accessibility was not included under the heading of appearing. On the contrary, all appearing, i.e., the accessibility of every content of our experience, was grounded in our own accessibility, more precisely in the core of our subjectivity—the supra-individual “transcendental subject”. This is where Patočka begins his critique: in Husserl, appearing is based on a particular being and is not thematised in itself. According to Patočka, Husserl thus betrayed his original phenomenological project. The universalisation of the *epochē*, its extension to the sphere of subjectivity, first makes it possible to study appearing as such, only thus do we “make appearing itself appear”.¹⁹ And since subjectivity is thus divested of the function of exclusive ground for appearing, Patočka calls his version of phenomenology *asubjective phenomenology*.

In the universal *epochē* it becomes apparent too that, just as the self is the condition of possibility of the appearing of mundane things, so the world, as the horizon of horizons (not as the totality of realities), is the condition of possibility of the appearing of the self. The egoic is, of course, never perceived or in any way immediately experienced in and of itself but rather only as the organizational center of a universal structure of appearance which cannot be reduced to anything appearing as such in its individual being. For this reason, we call this structure the world.²⁰

The refusal of the absolute ground of consciousness entails the abolition of the difference between the transcendence of mundane things and the immanence of the lived-experiences of consciousness. It becomes apparent that the world is not simply the sum of what appears to us but rather a special *a priori* horizon-structure *by means of which* anything can appear to us, precisely in our lived-experiences. This *a priori* world as the horizon of all horizons is, of course, nothing existent, or better: it is no existent thing, just as our lived-experiences are not existent things. Both are necessary components of the structure of appearing.

In our experiencing, which we are in principle always in a way secondarily aware of, we are with the appearing things. Without this possibility of secondary awareness, our experiencing would not be experiencing, nor would it be appearing. The structure of appearing thus implies the possibility for us to become aware of our experiencing. However, we stress once more that this does not mean that I can experience my *experiencing* self as something *experienced*. It must be understood that experiencing as such does not appear.

If I want to say nonetheless, with Descartes, that I, the experiencing self, the *cogitans*, am—and this is clearly what I do want to say, this is where we started from, I am surely no mere nothing—I must

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, § 33, 57; Eng. trans., 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, § 33, 59; Eng. trans., 65.

¹⁹ Patočka, “Epoché und Reduktion”, 421.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

necessarily say that I am otherwise than things, being does not mean the same thing for me as for things. Heidegger goes this way and attempts to describe this mode of being in explicit contrast to the mode of being of things. Patočka largely approves of his endeavour but demands that Heidegger's "structures of experience—the self, freedom, possibility, corporeity, perception, the other...—[be] explained not as a *ground* but rather as that which is *grounded on* the original event of the openness of time",²¹ i.e., in a new, non-subjectivist way.

What does this new, asubjective conception of the subject consist in? In order to answer this question, we shall have to consider, with Patočka, the manner in which anything at all appears to us. This "how" of appearing is something he pays considerable attention to, describing it over and over again. Sometimes he starts from Plato's Seventh Letter with its description of the steps leading to knowledge of the thing itself. Plato discovered in these steps different modes of appearance of an object, but Patočka criticizes him for not having developed a doctrine of appearing as he himself would have it. *Onoma, logos, eidōlon, alēthēs doxa, epistēmē*—these are for Patočka *different* modes of appearance of the *same* thing. The difference can, of course, be further and more finely differentiated, distinguishing various sorts of recollection and imagination, all the multiple aspects in which real physical things show themselves to us, but, no less, our groupings in the sphere of idealities in attempting to grasp a constant *eidos*. This is the first step of the consideration: the *same* thing appears in *different* ways.

The second step is fairly simple. The different modes of appearing, or characters of appearance, do not belong to the determination of what the appearing thing or ideality *is*. (For example, that rails converge in the distance or that we have wrongly visualized the steps of the demonstration of the theorem of Pythagoras and failed to prove it.)

The third step is decisive: the different modes of appearing, which do not belong to the determination of what the thing is, are not something subjective, something of our own that we add to—or, in fact, more often subtract from—the thing; rather, to quote Patočka: "characters of both kinds [i.e., those that belong to the determination of the thing and those that belong to its mode of appearance] appear in the world, in the phenomenal field 'before me,' they are not there as lived-experiences and things subjective",²² as Husserl persisted in vain in conceiving them. Husserl insisted that the characters of appearance are a subjective accomplishment of apperception of the object, that such accomplishments are in fact "the origin of the appearance of the transcendent",²³ and that in phenomenology, i.e., after the reduction, these accomplishments can be made "again the further object of a possible 'inner perception' apprehending it 'in original.'"²⁴ This Patočka refuses—and many others with him.

In the fourth step of the consideration we ask then what the subject—as that *to which* appearing appears, as a component of the field of appearance—does, admitting that it neither appercepts, nor intends, nor throws a spiritual garb over hyletic data. This is where Patočka's conception is least clear. It could perhaps be summed up as follows: the accomplishment of the subject in appearing consists in understanding that *the same* thing appears in different modes of appearance. He understands that appearance is "seeing through perspectives the one thing presenting itself in them... This seeing through the perspectives, this transcending of the sensibly given is, after all, an accomplishment that must be performed by someone, an accomplishment brought about by a

²¹ Jan Patočka, "Husserlova transcendentální filosofie po revizi" (1969) [Husserl's Transcendental Philosophy after Revision], (Archiv J. Patočky, Ms. 1992/004), 2. See French translation by E. Abrams, "La Philosophie Transcendentale de Husserl Après Révision", in Jan Patočka, *Introduction à la Phénoménologie de Husserl*, (Grenoble: Millon, 1992), 225.

²² Jan Patočka, "Der Subjektivismus der Husserlschen und die Forderung einer asubjektiven Phänomenologie" (1971), in *Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz*, 300.

²³ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 300-1.

recurrence and, in this recurrence, by the maintaining of an identical which then becomes the object".²⁵

One can see here a lack of clarity in that this accomplishment looks, at first sight, very like Husserl's apperception, constitution, etc. But we must read Patočka attentively. The main difference is that these subjective activities are not themselves "accessible in original by means of an objectifying act of reflection".²⁶ For Patočka, these activities of the subject are accessible only in what they contribute to, i.e. the progressive appearing of the thing as something identical in itself. The subject, of course, does not create the thing. The phenomenal characters themselves ask to be identified by the subject. There is in the subject as such "nothing that could be 'objectively' grasped, but simply a realizability of the demanding characters that address the ego in the field of appearance and make the egoic appear as realizer".²⁷ So once again: the *ego cogito* is immediately certain but it has no content. Everything that seems to be its content takes place—as it does itself—in the field of appearance. The "phenomenal field", the "being of the phenomenon as such...can neither be reduced to a being appearing within it, nor...explained on the basis of a being of whatever sort it may be, whether natural-objective or egoic-subjective".²⁸

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In conclusion, I would like to recall an important passage of Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus* where I believe Plato thematises our problem of appearing, I would go so far as to say in a (perhaps) "asubjective" conception. In this dialogue, Socrates is debating with the young mathematician Theaetetus on what is knowledge.

Socrates refutes Theaetetus' first answer, i.e., that knowledge is perception, by identifying it with the famous thesis of Protagoras that "man is the measure of all things, of the existence of the things that are and of the non-existence of the things that are not",²⁹ then reformulating this in a sensualist manner, as if Protagoras meant to say that "individual things are for me such as they appear to me and for you in turn such as they appear to you".³⁰

This becomes problematic if we hold what appears differently to different people to be true knowledge of things in themselves (speaking with Kant). Socrates attempts to dispose of the problem, which leads to contradiction, by taking up Heraclite's thesis that "nothing whatever is one, either a particular thing or of a particular quality; but it is out of movement and motion and mixture with one another that all those things become which we wrongly say 'are'".³¹ Things themselves continually change. Not only do they appear differently to different people, they *are* never the same, and hence Protagoras' relativist thesis is valid. Of course, it does not apply to things in themselves. With everything in perpetual becoming and change, there are no such things. But perhaps it could apply to phenomena.

A phenomenon, according to Socrates, comes into being as a result of the mutual encounter of the motion of the thing with that of the sense organ. For example, the phenomenon of colour is neither in the thing itself nor in the eye nor in any other determinate place; rather, it arises from the impact of the motion of the eye on the motion of the thing and is, so to say, "something between"

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Here and in the following, we quote (modifying it if need be) the English translation by H. N. Fowler in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 12, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 154 A.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 152 D.

(*metaxu ti*),³² we could almost say in a kind of neutral phenomenal field which is neither purely objective nor purely subjective.

But this still does not save the reformulation of Protagoras' relativist thesis. Phenomena, too, are in perpetual change, since the person to whom things appear is "never exactly the same"³³—here Socrates is undoubtedly thinking of our corporeity. And here Theaetetus begins to hesitate as to his definition of knowledge as perception. When Socrates makes him see that even the domain of quantity, where the mathematician feels most at home, is not concerned with the properties of things themselves, since things become either large or small depending on the scale we choose to measure them,³⁴ he exclaims that he is "lost in wonder".³⁵ Socrates praises him for this and utters the famous statement, so often quoted, on the origin of philosophy: "this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy".³⁶—This also confirms Patočka's repeated statement that the problem of appearance is the fundamental task not only of phenomenology but of philosophy in general.

There is, in the world, nothing fixed, "nothing exists as invariably one, itself by itself, but everything is always becoming in relation to something, and 'being' should be altogether abolished".³⁷ What is more, "we ought not, the wise men say, to permit the use of 'something' or 'somebody's' or 'mine' or 'this' or 'that' or any other word that implies making things stand still, but in accordance with nature we should speak of things as 'becoming' and 'being made' and 'being destroyed' and 'changing'".³⁸ But even this is still not exact. The fact is that all words tend to make things stand still; otherwise they could have no meaning. Since things cannot be made to stand still, it follows that it is altogether impossible to speak, and even more so to know, to come to know about anything.

That being the case, Socrates wishes once more to "look into the real essence of our thoughts"³⁹ and inquire what the things we think about (*ta tōn phrenōn*) are in themselves. Inconspicuously, he thus shifts the inquiry from the changing whirligig of outward things, via the neutral sphere of phenomena, to the realm of thought. He wants to "consider again the nature of these appearances within us",⁴⁰ to ask what they are (*hatta pot' esti tauta ta fasmata en hēmin*). He says that matters of thought are "something else than what can be grasped firmly with the hands"⁴¹—they are invisible, yet it would be incorrect to "deny their participation in being" (*hōs en ousias merei*).⁴² We are surprised to learn that all the concepts we have been using in speaking of the things around us—becoming, arising, whirligig, activity, passivity, etc.—have their origin in the soul.

To speak means to use words, to give names "to both particular objects and collective designations".⁴³ For example, to speak of "'mankind' and 'stone' and every animal and class"⁴⁴ means to bring the whirligig to a halt and to say about the thing in question whether or not it is, and what it is or is not.

³² *Ibid.*, 154 A.

³³ *Ibid.*, 154 A.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 154 C.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 155 C.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 155 D.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 157 A.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 157 B.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 154 E.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155 A.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 155 E.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 155 E.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 157 B.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 157 C.

This is precisely the task of the soul. The various bodily senses are mere instruments *through* which we perceive; they are not properly speaking that *by* which we perceive. The different sense perceptions must be somehow evaluated and compared, so as to ascertain that they have something in common, i.e., the thing they belong to. In order for this to be possible, all our senses must converge and “unite in one single form (*eis mian tina idean*), whether we should call it soul or something else, by which we perceive”.⁴⁵ There must be “some one and the same power within ourselves by which we perceive black and white through the eyes, and again other qualities through the other organs”.⁴⁶ “But through what organ”, Socrates now asks,

Is the faculty exerted which makes known to you that which is common to all things...that which you call being and not-being (*to estin, to ouk estin*)...and likeness and unlikeness, and identity and difference, also unity and plurality...and the odd and the even, and everything else that is in the same category?⁴⁷

Theaetetus himself then realizes that “there is no special organ at all for these notions, as there are for the others; but it appears to me that the soul views by itself directly what all things have in common”.⁴⁸ Strictly speaking, it is thus the soul that perceives. Only because the soul is continually one and the same⁴⁹ can it ascertain what is common to all perceptions, “reflecting within itself upon the past and present in relation to the future”⁵⁰ and, on the basis of this reflection, by and through itself,⁵¹ “in the process of reasoning about the sensations” (*en tōi peri ekeinōi syllogismōi*),⁵² constitute the thing, i.e., say whether it is or is not, whether it is beautiful or ugly, good or bad,⁵³ etc. For this reason, the soul can also ascertain that something changes, and say that change *is*. This actually means making change “stand still” and thereby first letting it *be* change.

So we can say that Protagoras’ thesis is valid in its original form. By his soul, man is indeed the measure of all things; he “decides” by an act of his soul whether things exist or not. His decisions are, of course, not arbitrary. This is where dialectic—the Socratic art of discussion—comes into play. In this discussion, we reflect upon the past and present in relation to the future,⁵⁴ distinguishing cause and effect, etc.; we examine “in the process of reasoning”⁵⁵ what comes to mind *by itself* along with our bodily sensations, and only “with difficulty and slowly, through many troubles, if at all”⁵⁶ do we succeed in eliminating contradiction⁵⁷ and acquiring the insight that all parts of our discourse are truly in agreement, fit and match one another. Only then can we call our discourse a definition and rightly believe that we possess knowledge.

I would say that Plato thematises here, in his own way, the problem of appearance as such, and that the solution he proposes is similar to Patočka’s: the accomplishments of the soul are invisible, since, when all is said and done, they take place in the very object they identify; despite this, their existence cannot be denied, just as Patočka grants the empty *ego cogito* an indubitable existence and joins in Heidegger’s quest of what this existence amounts to. We also see here quite clearly why the question of appearance is, in a certain sense, even more primordial than the question of being.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 184 D.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 184 D–E.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 185 C–D.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 185 D.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 184 D.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 186 A–B.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 186 A.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 186 D.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 186 A.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 186 A.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 186 D.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 186 C.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 186 B.

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