

Questions about Jan Patočka's "Originary Totality"

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Jan Patočka speaks of an "originary totality", that is, the whole which would be presupposed in the manifestation of any particular or individual being. This originary totality would not be a being as particular beings, and would therefore not appear as and of itself, but only concealed in the manifestation of the particular things appearing.

However, what this totality is, exactly, or what is its range, is not clear. It does not seem to be equivalent to a notion of a "life-world", to be the horizon of meaning in which all things appear, since the totality is not of the order of what is given, what is present for us. At the same time, it also does not seem to be the "structure of appearing", since that structure refers only to a legal, *a priori* structure of a condition of possibility for appearing, but which has no ontological value.

This totality, on the other hand, although it is characterized by absence, by concealing itself, *is*, nevertheless, the all-encompassing whole and the source of all individuated beings. It is of essential importance and it is capable of revealing our specific role in the world.

The following paper will attempt to unveil it, to determine its role and importance, and its relation to appearing. Another important manner of understanding totality is via Jan Patočka's three movements of existence, and specifically, the third, as an explicit relation which allows the totality, and our fundamental possibility within it, to become manifest.

Introduction

Jan Patočka writes of an "originary totality". This totality is, according to him, the unified total which each particular sensible experience implies, which it points to: all particular things appear within sensible experience, and are inscribed in this totality; all experience occurs from and within this totality. Nevertheless, although the totality must, therefore, be necessarily present in each appearance, it is not present as itself—it cannot be the object of an intuition. The totality, precisely because it is such, can only appear "hidden" within the appearing of "partial" experiences.

Experience, in its unified and serene march, presupposes not only an invariable style of laws ruling over the meeting with the conditioned singular, but also an 'unconditioned' totality in the midst of which each experience unfolds and towards which it is directed, being nothing other than a moment of continuous unfolding of that total horizon.¹

The "originary totality" could be thought then, as quoted, the "total horizon" from which all things appear. We understand our experience as occurring over a plurality of horizons—the horizons being sensory, affective, historical, etc. These partial horizons would, in turn, point to a final, *total* horizon. For example, as I write on my computer, my experience appears out of and reveals the horizon it is in: I can see the bookshelves appearing behind the screen, other tables and chairs in my periphery vision, I feel and hear the quiet bustle of a university library. This horizon—which places me not only in a sensory field, but also affectively, historically, etc.—through its limits, points beyond itself, to what is not presently given: the sunshine from the window beckons me outside, and reminds me of rest, home, and other horizons I live in. These partial horizons would all be part of a final, total horizon.

¹ Jan Patočka, "Réflexion sur l'Europe", *Liberté et Sacrifice*, trans. Erika Abrams (Grenoble: J. Millon, 1990) 192: "L'expérience, dans sa marche paisible et unie, présuppose non seulement un style invariable des lois qui régissent la rencontre du singulier conditionné, mais encore un tout 'inconditionné' au sein duquel chaque expérience se déroule et par lequel elle est dirigée, n'étant rien autre chose qu'un moment de déploiement continu de cet horizon total".

Husserl conceived of the "life-world" as the "final horizon of all horizons". Could Patočka's "originary totality" then correspond to Husserl's "life-world"?

Husserl's Life-world

At times, Patočka himself writes as if the two concepts could overlap:

The world is sometimes defined as the horizon of all horizons: horizon of the totality of reality in which each partial horizon, each closed connection of sense and understanding fits in its own place.²

And in an essay about Husserl's "life-world", writing that: "the life-world has no other function but to eclipse itself in face of the things and people it reveals and manifests".³ Nevertheless, Patočka is also openly and explicitly critical of Husserl's conception of "life-world", saying it is *secondary*, and, therefore, indicating a more originary, more primal, order (of "world hood"): "The life-world (or natural world) is a secondary concept of world, despite all the intuitive concretion it hopes to gather".⁴

According to Patočka, what Husserl's concept of "life-world" lacks is not anything factual, that could be said to be here in front of us, but rather something only perceivable in its "negative" form, in its absence or concealment:

What is lacking in the life-world as Husserl presents it? Why is it not originary? The lack does not regard anything that is present, anything present there in front of us in "flesh and bones" ... What is missing in Husserl's natural world is nothing 'positive', but rather the *world itself, in its primordial project*, which keeps itself hidden behind the *doxa*.⁵

The problem with Husserl's conception of "life-world" seems to be that it still corresponds to what is here in front of us—the "positive". It is still, it seems, too close to the conception of a factual totality of beings and, as such, their (total) result, rather than the condition for their possibility. The problem could lie, not in thinking the totality as a "final horizon", but rather of the way we think "horizon". "Horizon" is, however strong its illustrative power, an ambiguous term: it can point to the limit of my perception, the final line of my experience, or it can point to a condition, to a prior openness from which the particular experiences gather: "the world as *the collection of all objectivities* and the world as *the condition for possibility of all experience* are not identical and do not have the same type of evidence".⁶ In other terms, we can think of totality, or total horizon, either as the totality of beings, something we anticipate from the singularities—as I did in the description above, anticipating a total horizon from the partial ones—or we can conceive of it as the

² Jan Patočka, *Papiers Phénoménologiques*, trans. Erika Abrams (Grenoble : J. Millon, 1995), 64: "Le monde est défini parfois comme horizon de tous les horizons : horizon de la réalité en totalité dans laquelle chaque horizon partiel, chaque connexion fermée de sens et de compréhension s'insère à la place qui est la sienne".

³ Jan Patočka, "Phénoménologie du 'monde de la vie'", *Le Monde Naturel et le Mouvement de l'Existence Humaine [MNMEH]*, trans. Erika Abrams (Dordrecht : Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 242.

⁴ Patočka, "Réflexion sur l'Europe", *Liberté et Sacrifice*, 196: "Le monde de la vie (ou monde naturel) est un concept de monde secondaire, malgré toute la concrétion intuitive qu'il prétend réunir".

⁵ *Ibid.*: "Qu'est-ce qui manque au monde de la vie tel que Husserl le présente? Pourquoi n'est-il pas originaire? Le manque ne concerne rien de présent, rien que se présente là-devant nous en chair et en os ... Ce qui manque au monde naturel de Husserl n'est rien de 'positif', mais bien plutôt *le monde même, en son projet primordial*, qui se tient caché derrière la *doxa*".

⁶ Jan Patočka, "Les Méditations Cartésiennes", *Qu'est-ce que la Phénoménologie ?*, trans. Erika Abrams (Grenoble: J. Millon, 1988), 175: "le monde comme *l'ensemble de toute objectivité* et le monde comme *la condition de possibilité de toute expérience* ne sont pas identiques et n'ont pas le même type d'évidence".

condition for their possibility, as something which is prior to the appearing of particulars, as something which is *presupposed* rather than *indicated*.⁷

And so we must descriptively characterize the consciousness ‘of horizon’ and its totality, the most extreme horizon, the horizon of the world, as something originary which cannot be composed from impressions, from their represented layers, and from a combinations of the two.⁸

In both conceptions, horizon does not appear of itself or in the same manner as particular entities do, they are both “hidden” in the appearance of things. However, the total horizon as antecedent, as condition for possibility—or in these terms, the originary totality, or the “world”—is the “*negative*” presence which Husserl’s “life-world” lacked.

“Negative Platonism”

What lies “hidden behind the world of doxa”, in Plato’s famous dividing line, is the intelligible world of ideas, reigning over the first. In a proposal he calls “negative Platonism”, Patočka suggests that the problem in the history of philosophy has been to continuously interpret this division as one marking out domains of being, pointing to a region where beings “are more”. Patočka wants, like Heidegger, to overcome metaphysics, and proposes, thus, not to think this division as indicating levels of being, but to consider it radically, as a “proper division”, without a “beyond”.

The χωρισμός [*Korismos*] is a separation, a distinction in itself, absolute separation as such. The mystery it holds is not one of a new continent that could be discovered beyond an intermediary ocean, but rather a mystery that is to be deciphered and discovered in the χωρισμός as such, without making intervene anything beyond.⁹

The division has as its correlate a genuine human experience which Patočka calls the “experience of freedom”. He describes it as “the experience of dissatisfaction regarding what is given and the sensible”¹⁰ and that it “has the negative character of a distance, a distancing, a surpassment of all objectivities, of all that is content, representation or substrate”.¹¹ According to Patočka, the Platonic division evidenced this human capacity and inclination to distance ourselves from what is immediately given towards what is not (but can be present in another manner), and the metaphysical problems arose when another world of “truer being” was postulated. Patočka’s proposal is to think instead of a “negative idea”: that is, the distance between entities, of which we say *is*, and what is besides all entities. What happens if we step back from all entities? Do we reach “absolute nothing”?¹²

We have come again to the two different conceptions of totality: to take a step away from beings is either logically impossible, when we conceive of making an object out of the totality of all that is,

⁷ This difference regarding these two conceptions of horizon is also pointed to, for example, by Dermot Moran, “Fink and Speculative Phenomenology: Between Constitution and Transcendence”, *Research in Phenomenology*, 37 (2007), 3-31.

⁸ Jan Patočka, “La Préhistoire de la Science du Mouvement”, *MNMEH*, 5: “Ainsi nous faut-il caractériser descriptivement la conscience ‘d’horizon’ et sa totalité, l’horizon le plus extrême, l’horizon du monde, comme quelque chose d’originaire qui ne peut être composé à partir des impressions, de leur calques représentés et des combinaisons des deux”.

⁹ Jan Patočka, “Platonisme Négatif”, in *Liberté et Sacrifice*, trans. Erica Abrams (Grenoble: J. Million, 1993), 87 : “Le χωρισμός est une séparation, une distinction en soi, la séparation absolue comme telle. Le mystère qu’il renferme n’est pas celui d’un nouveau continent qui serait à découvrir au-delà d’un océan intercalaire, mais bien un mystère qu’il s’agit de déchiffrer et de découvrir dans le χωρισμός comme tel, sans faire intervenir rien au-delà”.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.84.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90-91: “L’Idée n’apparaîtra-t-elle pas nécessairement comme quelque chose de principiellement inexistant—en raison précisément du *korismos* qui nous oblige à la poser dans une opposition absolue à la totalité de tout étant, à la fois subjectif et objectif? Et si nous éliminons tout étant, que reste-t-il d’autre que le néant absolu?”

or it leads us towards the condition for possibility of all beings (which can be considered "nothing", from the point of view of entities). This condition for possibility is what Patočka calls the "originary totality":

One is confusing here two conceptions of totality: the concept of totality as the collection of beings (which is unrealizable) and the concept of a whole as phenomenon without which the appearing as such would be impossible, that is the condition of possibility of appearing.¹³

***Epochē* and "Appearing as Such"**

The "experience of freedom" appears, from its description, to be nothing more than the *epochē*, specifically in its universalized version Patočka develops in the project of an asubjective phenomenology. In the essay on "Negative Platonism", Patočka describes the "negative" experience of freedom writing that "one may not only suspend the belief in each sensible experience, bracket each sensorial domain taken by itself, but also surpass the *ego* as such".¹⁴ The universalized *epochē*, in Patočka's texts, in including the thesis of the "I" (or *ego*) would lead us not to a realm of transcendental consciousness, to the (ontic) domain of a being, but rather away from *what* appears to the "appearing as such". The *epochē*, if taken to its full consequences, is able precisely to shift our attention from the things appearing towards the field of appearing, to the sphere where all phenomena take place. Is the "original totality" then the "sphere of appearing as such"?

In an article titled "Patočka and Artificial Intelligence",¹⁵ James Mensch writes that the "appearing as such" is the formal structure which determines how all appearing appears—i.e. that all appearing includes a "what" that appears, a "someone" it appears to, and a "how"—and that it is, therefore, a set of laws without any metaphysical or ontological value. According to Mensch, Patočka's claims that Plato's "dividing line" was the first instance of the mistake of confusing modes of appearing for levels of being¹⁶ expresses the intention to take the overcoming of metaphysics even further than Heidegger, and to break the tie between being and appearing, "it would entail our abandoning the attempt to speak of appearing in terms of being, i.e. to link it to some ontological commitment".¹⁷ But while Patočka's negative Platonism was a criticism directed at the metaphysical construction of another "higher order", this does not necessarily mean that it is an ontological depleting of appearing. In fact, it seems that what Patočka is doing is reverting the hierarchy between being and appearing: "one must ask: are the characters of manifestation made manifest because they are characters of being, or are they characters of being because they are made manifest?"¹⁸

Patočka moves away from metaphysics and towards a sphere of appearing as such, but what we finally reach is not entirely void, ontologically speaking. While there may be structures of appearing, determining *a priori* what is necessary for the appearing of anything, it seems that there

¹³ Jan Patočka, "Qu'est-ce que la Phénoménologie?", *Qu'est-ce que la Phénoménologie?*, 294 : "on confond ici deux concepts de la totalité: le concept de la totalité comme l'ensemble de l'étant (ce qui est irréalisable) et le concept d'un tout comme phénomène sans lequel l'apparaître en tant que tel serait impossible, qui est la condition de possibilité de l'apparaître".

¹⁴ Jan Patočka, "Platonisme Négatif", 79-80: "on peut non seulement suspendre la croyance à chaque expérience sensible, mettre hors de circuit chaque domain sensoriel pris à part, mais encore dépasser l'*ego* comme tel, pour autant qu'il est soumis à la passivité des sens, le laisser au-dessous de soi comme simple objet d'observation et d'étude".

¹⁵ James Mensch, "Patočka and Artificial Intelligence", *PhilPapers*, <http://philpapers.org>.

¹⁶ Patočka, *Papiers Phénoménologiques*, 126.

¹⁷ Mensch, "Patočka and Artificial Intelligence", 7. Since the presentation of this paper I have had the pleasure to speak to James Mensch who pointed out, with reason, that to say the appearing as such is free of ontological commitments is not the same as to say it is ontologically void. In the following argument, I run the risk of implying he holds a position he did not affirm. For the current purpose of publishing this communication, I have left this as it was presented.

¹⁸ Patočka, *Papiers Phénoménologiques*, 209: "Il faudrait demander: les caractères de manifestation rendent-ils manifest parce qu'ils sont des caractères d'être, ou bien sont-ils des caractères d'être parce qu'ils rendent manifest?"

is yet a pre-condition for appearing and that is an (ontological) originary totality, prior to the individuation of particular phenomena.

In the first quotation used, Patočka writes that, in the course of experience, there are laws ruling over the appearance of singularities (in which we are a part, being the ones to which things appear), but also that there is an “unconditioned” whole—which is as if the ocean out of which each sensible experience arises from, falls back to, and in this movement manifests all at once. James Mensch’s article helps us see this imprecision or ambiguity in how to conceive “appearing as such”: we can think of a structure of appearing as the first, an *a priori* lawful structure regarding the appearing, but that there would be also the ontological depth, manifest *in* appearing, and this would be the originary totality.

What appears here is not a being, but precisely the whole, and that totality is not an entity but being. It is a ‘non-thing’ that, as such, can be considered a ‘nothing’.¹⁹

We can renew the path and follow Patočka’s criticism of the metaphysical division of orders of beings, but maintain ontological relevance in the shift by combining the previous criticism with the subordination of Being to appearing.

Being and(in) Appearing

The originary totality *is* in its appearing. In speaking of the transcendence of the world, Patočka writes:

That will be established by conceiving being itself from appearing, instead of taking the appearing for something that would happen in regards to being. Being would be in itself concealment, but concealment is a mode of appearing. The totality would be the totality of appearing, between the poles of concealment and non-concealment. Therefore, far from being distinct from appearing, the totality *is* the appearing itself.²⁰

In this way, *Being is appearing*. The sphere of appearing is ontologically as rich as could be, and it is instead, Being outside of manifestation that has no value, or place, whatsoever. “Negative Platonism” suggests precisely this reversal: it is not a negation of Being, but a negation of Being as something other, higher, beyond the appearing. Being, for Patočka, seems to be nothing other than Being manifest. But what does this mean?

The criticism to Husserl can now be read as being levelled at understanding world as a domain of the actual, rather than the possible.

If we do not understand the sense of origin of possibilities, and therefore, of the future, the primordial character of the world is lost, which is necessarily the case there where one attaches oneself above all to the *given* character of the appearing. The world itself as ‘horizon’ can then be interpreted—and that’s what Husserl does—as indifferent to orientation and temporalization, as simple horizon ‘intentionality’.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 221: “Ce qui apparaît ici n’est pas un étant, mais justement le tout, et cette totalité n’est pas étant, mais être. C’est une ‘non-chose’ qui, en tant que telle, peut aussi être désigné comme un rien”.

²⁰ Patočka, *Papiers Phénoménologiques*, 224: “Cela serait établi en concevant l’être lui-même à partir de l’apparition, au lieu de prendre l’apparition pour quelque chose qui ferait vis-à-vis l’être. L’être serait en lui-même retrait, mais le retrait est une modalité de l’apparaître. Le tout serait le tout de l’apparition, entre les pôles du retrait et du non-retrait. Ainsi, loin d’être distinct de l’apparition, le tout est l’apparition elle-même”.

²¹ Patočka, “Réflexion sur l’Europe”, *Liberté et Sacrifice*, 195: “Si on ne comprend pas le sens d’origine qui est celui des possibilités et, partant, de l’avenir, la caractère primordial du monde se perd, ce qui est nécessairement le cas là où l’on s’attache avant tout au caractère de *donnée* de l’apparaissant. Le monde lui-même en tant qu’ ‘horizon’ peut alors être interprété—et c’est ce que fait Husserl—comme indifférent à l’orientation et à la temporalisation, comme simple ‘intentionnalité’ d’horizon”.

The criticism is, then, close to Heidegger's or at least presents a thesis that could be associated to him. This means, concretely, to conceive Being as being-possible, as possibility itself. Traditional metaphysics presents Being not only as dwelling above, but also as static, complete, achieved. To think Being in terms of appearing means, on the contrary, to think it as possibility (and, as such, as *dynamis*). The sphere of appearing, Being as appearing, could thus be conceived as field of possibility, in which the singular phenomena emerge and disappear, the totality present in its concealment (and in which this appearing is determined by a certain structure). We ourselves are an active part in this totality: as all-encompassing it includes us, and we are a part of its appearing (realising and existing in possibilities). The totality, or Being, is not something resting in another plane beyond, but is in its Being manifest in which we participate. The absolute is here, in problematicity. And as such, it is in our responsibility.

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