



The philosophy of freedom in Jan Patočka's thought

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Abstract

This article undertakes a genealogical analysis of the concept of freedom elaborated by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. It particularly examines the relevance of the insights contained in the incomplete project of the *Negative Platonism*, elaborated around 1953. In this seminal work, Patočka endeavors to illuminate a “negative” path for philosophical discourse, one that embraces the character of the negative, not as negation but as distancing. Through a nuanced reconceptualization of Plato’s *chorismós* and Husserl’s *epoché*, Patočka argues how this “positive negativity” illuminates the very structure of the experience of freedom. This article discusses how the theoretical impetus of the *Negative Platonism* gained considerable momentum in Patočka’s 1970s reflections. During these years, the idea of freedom acquired a more pronounced ethical-political dimension, primarily through its interaction with the concept of *Pólemos*. It then advances the hypothesis that, at this stage, Patočka’s understanding of freedom became indissociable from the notion of responsibility. A connection crucially elaborated in correspondence with his prominent engagement in the dissident experience of Charta 77. By analyzing the intricate constellation of concepts surrounding Patočka’s notion of freedom, this article ultimately aims to demonstrate the enduring relevance of this paradigm for interpreting our present.

Keywords Freedom · Patočka · Negative platonism · Pólemos · Solidarity · Responsibility

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1 Introduction

Throughout the world, we are witnessing a worrying proliferation of illiberal and repressive measures, promoted by those very same political groups that rhetorically champion the safeguarding of democracy. Confronted with an increasingly constricted space for enacting freedom and the undermining of both individual and collective actions, an inquiry into the meaning of freedom becomes more urgent. Freedom is a powerful concept. Yet, it is also extremely fragile and can be easily abused, becoming a privilege for some and an empty promise for many.

To transcend the conventional Western debate on freedom, often polarized between negative and positive liberty, the thought of Jan Patočka offers a compelling alternative pathway. Shaped by the tangible and psychological constraints of Communist authoritarianism, Patočka intimately understood the distortions and vulnerabilities inherent in the concept of freedom.

Building upon the work of existing scholarship that highlighted the enduring importance of Patočka's reflections on freedom,¹ this paper undertakes a genealogical exploration of this pivotal notion, tracing its multifaceted and evolving layers. The study seeks to underscore the originality of his alternative theorization of freedom within the project of *Negative Platonism*, clarifying its ontological roots articulated through a nuanced reconceptualization of Plato's *chorismós* and Husserl's *epoché*. The paper will then demonstrate how these reflections acquired a more pronounced ethical and political dimension as he confronted the "short century's" catastrophes and the oppressive reality of the real socialist regime. Specifically, this genealogical analysis will reveal the conceptual resonances and connections between the concepts of *chorismós* and *Pólemos*. Ultimately, the paper will show how the idea of freedom becomes inseparably connected to the notion of responsibility. This connection crucially emerges in correspondence with Patočka's engagement in the dissident experience of Charta 77, where freedom manifests as the ethical practice of "living in truth" and the solidarity of the shaken.

2 The genealogy of the concept of freedom from Patočka's early writings to *Negative Platonism*

The complexity of Patočka's reflections on freedom arises from the fact that the Czech philosopher never proposed an organic and programmatic definition but rather thematized a densely interwoven constellation of concepts. Instead of balancing harmoniously together, these concepts often diverge into discordant echoes, which amplify each other, opening and shaking their core meanings.

From his habilitation thesis in 1936, *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*, to the lectures of the private seminar in 1973, later titled *Plato and Europe*, Patočka rethought and reformulated the discourse on freedom several times. Before

¹ About Patočka's understanding of freedom, see Mensch (2016), Ritter (2019), Tardivel (2011), for its phenomenological and existential grounding, and see Manton (2007), Tava (2015 a) for its ethical and political implications.

the 1950s, the notion of freedom was fundamentally shaped by his ongoing dialogue with both Husserl and Heidegger and by his critical confrontation with ancient philosophy and Platonism. Subsequently, in the 1960s, the concept was deepened through the phenomenology of movement, which provided a dynamic structure for human existence, notably articulated in the three movements of existence. Finally, in the 1970s, freedom became explicitly inscribed within an ethical-political horizon.

Within this framework, this paper intends to underscore the enduring relevance of Patočka's *Negative Platonism*,² a project elaborated around 1953. Serving as a crucial turning point in his meditation on freedom, this project contains *in nuce* the connection between his ontological insights and the articulation of freedom's ethical-political dimension. Even in its incomplete form, the work possesses considerable conceptual depth and can be regarded as a fundamental component of his theoretical system.³

The reflections of 1936 reveal an idea of freedom shaped by a certain distancing from Heidegger's assumption about the negativity inherent in the human essence: "... [W]e can no longer see being as *fatum* but rather as a law drawn from our innermost core, as a creation that offers a certain space of freedom also to upsurges of new creativity" (Patočka 2016, p. 20). At this initial stage, the origin of freedom is the inner rational relationship of humanity with the infinite world as an externalization characterized by dominance towards the world and others. A second phase of theorization emerges in two essays, *Life in Equilibrium and Life in Amplitude* (1939) and *Eternity and Historicity* (1947), which contain the premises that will culminate in the pivotal shift of *Negative Platonism*.

In these texts, Patočka explores a deeper origin of freedom in the amplitude of life: "Amplitude exists where Man leaves behind him the everyday level of the usual life of enchantment, the level of sober untruth that veils the vision before the true heights and true dangers of our existence – there towards which Man heads with a calm expression and before which our timid finitude flees. [...] Living in amplitude means a test of oneself and a *protest*" (Patočka 2007b, p. 37).

At this juncture, freedom is considered the movement of life towards its extreme limits, defined as experiencing life in its negative essence. This development marks the reemergence of two Heideggerian elements: (1) the ontological significance of negativity as the ultimate foundation of human being, and (2) the notion that freedom is not understood in the mode of domination, but rather of "abandonment." This "abandonment" signifies that freedom is not an object that can be definitively possessed, because it is a dimension that perpetually exceeds human existence.

² The idea of a "negative Platonism" does not designate a single completed concept, but rather embraces a broader philosophical project left unfinished. Of the eight long sections of the original project, we now only have a series of fragments, in which we sometimes find writings with their conceptual independence, such as *Negative Platonism*, which Patočka himself divulged and used as material for discussion with his students, and sometimes, instead, writings that remained incomplete.

³ About the theoretical richness of the *Negative Platonism*, a lot has been written by both Czech and international scholars: Arnason (2007), Frei (2017), Karfík (2006), Hejdánek (2016), Rezek (1993), Ritter (2019), Sladký (2015).

An essential driver in this interpretative shift is Patočka's engagement with the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* by Kojève,⁴ through which he also embarks on the revision of the Husserlian concept of *epoché*. And it is precisely the thematization of *epoché* as “*epoché* without reduction”—perhaps even more than his reconciliation with the Heideggerian perspective—that allows Patočka to reconfigure the idea of negativity, which is central to his new understanding of freedom.⁵ In its purity, *epoché* appears as an act of subjective freedom that allows one to suspend all judgment concerning the world and entities. However, this suspension does not consist in the abstract skeptical negation of reality but rather is configured as a dynamic enclosure in parentheses of the “natural attitude,” which remains oblivious to any critical reflection.

According to Patočka, Husserl inexorably deviates from the path of phenomenology in his attempt to ground philosophy as *strenge Wissenschaft*. Through Husserl's arrival at an absolute, purified consciousness, the extraordinary moment of *epoché* is shattered and dispersed in the phenomenological reduction. Husserl failed to fully uphold the richness of the *epoché*'s opening, limiting it. In Patočka's eyes, the flaw of the transcendental reduction is that it leads back to consciousness as its firm, referent datum. This paradox forecloses the opening to the original “not” present at the foundation of reality, the ultimate negativity, that can be recognized through the radical approach of the “*epoché* without reduction.”⁶ For Patočka, only by eliminating all absolutism and transparency, even from the consciousness, can one properly grasp the negativity of reality. However, this negativity is not to be understood as pure negation, but as openness to problematization: referring to that aspect of reality that always remains mysterious, conflictual, and cannot be completely positivized.

This original approach to the negative, which highlights its non-negative character, is properly theorized in the pages that Patočka dedicates to the idea of *Negative Platonism*. This text reveals that negativity holds both ontological and ethical significance, serving as the central concept in Patočka's critique of positive Platonism's metaphysics and his understanding of the experience of freedom.⁷ Patočka's interest in Plato and ancient philosophy dates back already to the 1930s, and it is characterized by a clear emphasis and deepening of its ethical and political dimension (Patočka 2007a).

In his endeavor to problematize Plato's thought and to identify which meaning it could have had for his historical context, the Czech philosopher claims a close relation between Platonism and politics: “[T]he ultimate meaning of Platonism is,

⁴ The importance of reading Kojève's *Introduction* to Hegel is testified in the correspondence with Robert Campbell. See Patočka (2019).

⁵ The connection between Patočka's formulation of the theory of freedom and Husserl's concept of the *epoché* has been highlighted by P. Rezek (1993).

⁶ In the 1970s, the theme of “*epoché* without reduction” is taken up in terms of a universalization of *epoché*, which will lead Patočka to the characterization of his phenomenology as “asubjective,” see Patočka (2015b).

⁷ A first critique of positive Platonism can be found in the 1947 essay, *Eternity and Historicity*, where Patočka addresses Radl's 1946 book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The critique of its positive Platonism becomes the pretext for a more general critique of the metaphysics of humanism, the underlying target of which is Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, published the same year. See Tardivel (2011).

I think, a spiritual *universum*, into which a person penetrates by means of a certain purely inner and active (but absolutely not mythical) purification. The purification or philosophy is the most important and most intensive *praxis*, solely able to give to the life of the individual as well as of society a necessary unity, to give life that inner center which one potentially keeps within oneself as the unfulfilled meaning of one's life" (Patočka 2006, 341–44).

In Patočka's view, Platonism, like philosophy, is primarily conceived as a spiritual attitude oriented towards penetrating the complexity of reality. Distinct from modern intellectualism—whether manifested as simple inquisitiveness, a mode of everyday existence, or aesthetic pursuit—philosophy's spiritual attitude enables a detachment that signifies not a withdrawal but a deep immersion in the world's dynamic processes.

The meditations in the *Negative Platonism* project aim to outline an effort to both overcome and preserve metaphysics in a deeper sense (Patočka 1989, p. 197). Indeed, Patočka approaches the problem of the death of metaphysics by reckoning with both the post-metaphysical terrain and the unavoidable reference to Plato (Arnason 2007, p. 9). Through an original reinterpretation of Platonic thought and of his theory of Ideas, Patočka positioned himself at the forefront of a critique not only of traditional metaphysics, which he considers "positive," but also of anti-metaphysical attempts, which he views as merely skeptical refusals. Therefore, his critique of metaphysics is not configured as a rejection of metaphysics but rather a critique of the deadening effects of metaphysical systematization, as positivism and dialectical humanism (Findlay 2002, 68–74).

Recognizing the human's essential need to look beyond the given reality, he delineates the internal history of metaphysics, whose creator is undoubtedly Plato. However, Patočka argues that Plato's thought "remains rooted in the premetaphysical soil and seeks to capture and exploit it by describing the figure of Socrates" (Patočka 1989, p. 180). In contrast to the Socratic model, it was first with Plato's conceptualization of the ideas, and later with Aristotle's systemic and scientific approach, that a positive rationalistic metaphysics emerged. This marks the closure of the negative attitude of Socrates toward a form of positive knowledge.

In Patočka's view, to understand metaphysics in a more profound sense, it is necessary to recover the heart of Socratic teaching: alongside the experience we *have* of reality in the form of sensory data, there is also the experience that we *are*, as historical creatures. Such is the experience of freedom. He states: "The interpretation of our human experience, the experience of historical being, is only possible from the experience of freedom, never just on the basis of objective and passive experience. While metaphysics discovers a new universe, taking it as its starting point and transcending it, the interpretation of experience discovers, uncovers, sheds light on this, our given life-world uncovering what had been hidden in it, its concealed meaning, its intrinsic structure, its internal drama" (Patočka 1989, p. 197).

The recovery of Socratic freedom enables Patočka to oppose the tradition of positive Platonism, grounding metaphysics in the historical experience of human beings. While metaphysics discovers a new universe and transcends it, interpreting the human experience as historical allows Patočka to uncover its internal structure and its problematicity. However, the critique of both traditional metaphysics and anthro-

pocentric humanism does not entail the rejection of the experience of transcendence. Instead, transcendence is now conceived not as a distinct realm of positive contents but rather as an experience of the negative.

With the project of *Negative Platonism*, Patočka intends to highlight a “negative” path for the philosophical discourse, one that embraces the character of the negative, not as a negation but as a distancing that seeks to overcome the objective. This negative transcendence, understood as distancing, constitutes the very structure of the experience of freedom and, as Patočka argues, this approach could secure a significant and deeper meaning of metaphysics in the twentieth century.

3 *Negative platonism: the theorization of freedom as chorismós*

In the 1950s, through the idea of *Negative Platonism*, Patočka elaborated a way to restore the sense of the philosophical discourse as an authentic attempt at understanding the human experience: a “philosophy of freedom.” As discussed in the previous section, it is precisely through the experience of freedom that the real core of Platonism emerges, as the non-negative character of the negative. This part will focus on outlining in detail which concepts enabled Patočka to structure this “negative” path for philosophy.

According to Patočka, freedom is understood not as an object to possess, but rather as a risky experience, linked with the struggle of the problematicity of human existence, because its nature is that of a conquest never simply obtained. In this sense, the experience of freedom involves “negative experiences,” as it reveals the negative nature of distance, as an “act of global withdrawal, of a global dissatisfaction, of unresting in mere objectivity” (Patočka 1989, p. 196). Contrasting with the Hegelian negativity (which negates the given sensible reality) and the negativity associated with the concept of free will (which is contingent on the concept of causality), Patočka understands the negative as suspension (Ullman 2011). It is precisely through this act of distancing that the sphere of objectivity is created. The potential for a positive affirmation of objective entities is contingent upon the sustained reference to the “no,” which affords a degree of separation.

This experience of negativity, as radical suspension and problematization of reality, carries within itself the sense of what, in 1947, he had previously identified as “*epoché* without reduction.” In Patočka’s view, both traditional metaphysics and anti-metaphysical approaches failed by obscuring the crucial rift in reality, hiding it behind ontological screens. By erasing this rift and the reference to the internal “no,” they effectively denied the problematic nature of human existence. Therefore, the significant theoretical shift of *Negative Platonism* proposes a non-metaphysical interpretation of reality, understood as a recovery, rather than a simple reversal of metaphysical inquiry. This approach leads to defining separation not as negation but as suspension, and being as difference, not as identity (Tardivel 2011, p. 48).

Patočka argues that the experience of freedom, understood as a suspension actively engaging with problematicity, is inherent in the Socratic attitude. “Learned ignorance” enables the preservation of the essential ambiguity of human reality by continuously highlighting the “no” that underpins the “yes” of existence. Similarly,

in Patočka's views, Plato acknowledged the problematic nature of reality through distancing, which is crucial for experiencing freedom, as is evident in his assertion that "ideas exist separately (*χωρῖς*) and in and of themselves (*αὐτὸ καθ'αὐτὸ*)."⁸ Despite his critique of Plato, Patočka sought to rescue a "negative Platonism," emphasizing the Platonic intuition of *chorismós*. Just as Husserl couldn't fully grasp the *epoché*, Plato couldn't fully penetrate the richness of his own insight.⁸

Complementary to the "*epoché* without reduction," Patočka's idea of negativity is structured around the central, though negated, concept of *chorismós*, a key element of the Platonic theory of Ideas. He states: "It is, however, important to understand precisely why the *chorismós*, the separation, the isolation, is an important phenomenon that we cannot ignore and silence. We need to set aside one metaphor suggested by the label *chorismós*, that of separation of something from something, of two regions of objects. *Chorismós* meant originally a separateness without a second object realm. It is a gap that does not separate two realms coordinated or linked by something third that would embrace them both and so would serve as the foundation of both their coordination and their separation. *Chorismós* is a separateness, a distinctness *an sich*, an absolute one, for itself. [...] the mystery of the *chorismós* is like the experience of freedom" (Patočka 1989, p. 198).

Patočka's *chorismós* diverges from the Platonic notion of separation by positing a distinction that does not generate two independent objective realms. Instead, it denotes a separation that occurs in the absence of a second realm of objects. *Chorismós* is understood as a connection, yet it is not a third term that coordinates or unifies two distinct realms. Rather, it is that which preserves the trace of difference and separation—an absolute separateness in and of itself. In other words, this separation does not entail disjunction because it signifies permanence in a fundamental state of tension.

Departing from both the Hegelian absolute and the Platonic Idea, Patočka understands *chorismós* as the ontological difference in a non-metaphysical sense. As an active experience lacking inherent positive content, *chorismós* functions as the symbol of freedom, opening the way to the transcendental dimension of historical existence. Interpreting *chorismós* through the lens of *epoché*, Patočka reveals that freedom and *chorismós* are two facets of the same phenomenon: the active endeavor of liberation and the capacity to struggle for an inherently unacquirable state. The articulation of the relationship between *epoché*, *chorismós*, and freedom, as situated within the framework of *Negative Platonism*, gives rise to a novel conception of the *Idea*. By interpreting the *Idea* as the abbreviation of *chorismós*, Patočka illuminates the core elements that remained obscure in Plato's theory. He argues: "If, then, we take the *Idea* metaphysically as shorthand for the *chorismós* and *chorismós* as the symbol of freedom, we can say that philosophy stands and falls with the conception of the *Idea* and that no one can understand philosophy if he has no access to the *Idea*. Yet in a strict sense of the word, the *Idea*, the absolute object, cannot be put on the same level of freedom; rather, we need to transcend the *Idea* itself, to reach beyond it, to strip it of its presentational, objective, iconic character" (Patočka 1989, p. 199).

⁸ About the thesis of a twofold radicalization in Patočka's thought, both of Platonism and Husserlian phenomenology see P. Rodrigo (2011).

By asserting that the *Idea* should be considered stripped of its representational character offers a distinct critique of the Platonic doctrine of participation between things and *Ideas*. Traditionally considered by metaphysics as objects in themselves endowed with positive content, ideas became a source of human objectification, leading to a closure of the profound sense of negativity. In contrast, once freed from any metaphysical detritus, the *Idea*, by virtue of the *chorismós*, occupies a unique position beyond both subjective and objective beings, preventing the presence of any entity within it.

Patočka posits that Ideas are configured as de-objectifying and de-realizing potencies. In their incisive and ineffable forms, they operate as forces of distancing from every conceivable object, demonstrating the transcendence to which human existence is essentially bound. Therefore, the *Idea* stands as “a constant call to go beyond mere objectivity, mere factuality” (Patočka 1989, p. 204). For Patočka, freedom means embracing the responsibility of a constant effort toward liberation, embodied in the principle of *chorismós*, or separation. This principle asserts that the *Idea* is not a substance, but an appeal to de-realize all objective and subjective barriers of reality.

Conceptualizing the *Idea* as an appeal underscores the inherent ethical significance of negativity, thereby presenting it as a unique opportunity for metaphysics to remain relevant. However, this ethical dimension should not be constructed as the establishment of an absolute normative principle; instead, it represents an endeavor to articulate a philosophy of the experience of freedom, comprehended as a movement of distancing from any absolutist pretension.⁹ Hence, Patočka characterizes his Platonism as philosophical reflection possessing both richness and poverty. “Platonism so conceived is at the same time a very poor and a very rich philosophy. It is poor because it gives up the claim that historical Platonism did not actually carry out but that inspired the whole tradition that followed from it, the claim to be a system of science. [...] It is, however, always rich because it preserves for humans one of their essential possibilities, philosophy purified of metaphysical claims” (Patočka 1989, p. 205).

Therefore, in the framework of *Negative Platonism*, the de-realized and de-objectified *Idea* functions as the symbol of freedom. Patočka’s concept of freedom denotes a negative freedom, yet one marked by a continuous tension between affirmation and negation. This inherently risky and undefined freedom acknowledges the inherent contradictions of human existence. Ultimately, it becomes clear that Patočka’s notion of the negative, which structures the experience of freedom, reveals itself as a “positive negativity” ontologically grounded in the principles of suspension and separation—*chorismós*—conceived as a movement of perpetual questioning.

Despite the richness of its ontological insights, Patočka abruptly abandoned the *Negative Platonism* project just years later, dismissing it as an “incomprehensible naivety.” Although Patočka never explicitly clarified his reasons for this change of perspective, scholars hypothesize that the shift is tied to internal shortcomings, specifically the unresolved tension between positivity and negativity inherent in the theorization of the *Idea* (Frei 2017). External factors are also debated: some argue that

⁹ The ethical significance of negativity is deepened and clarified through Patočka’s recovery of the Socratic theme of the care of the soul (*epimeleia tēs psychēs*) during the 1970s. See Patočka (2002).

the study of Aristotelian movement led to the project's abandonment, noting that the transcendence of the Idea subsequently gave way to the opening of the third movement of existence in the 1960s. An alternative view holds that renewed contact with German colleagues and the resumption of German phenomenology study redirected Patočka toward the asubjective characterization of his phenomenology.¹⁰

Contributing to this scholarly framework, this study aims to illuminate a genealogical connection between the complex, unresolved tension in the *Negative Platonism*'s concept of freedom and the later concept of *Pólemos*, which became central in the 1970s.

4 Towards a *Polemological* freedom

The new perspective developed in *Negative Platonism* gained further theoretical momentum in the reflections of the 1970s, specifically in the series of private conferences that would later form the text of *Plato and Europe*, and in his prominent work *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. In this period, the concept of freedom underwent a reformulation, acquiring a more pronounced ethical-political dimension, mainly due to its interaction with the concept of *Pólemos*. The peculiar conflictuality denoted by *Pólemos* is a pervasive element in Patočka's theoretical corpus, acting as a *trait d'union*, an undertone that shapes his reflections on phenomenology, world, subjectivity, historicity, philosophy, war, and politics.¹¹

Given the breadth of Patočka's concept of *Pólemos*, a comprehensive discussion would necessitate a far more extensive analysis. Consequently, this section will focus specifically on the nexus between *Pólemos* and the idea of freedom. Unlike interpretations that primarily connect *Pólemos* to the historical emergence of political life,¹² this analysis intends to highlight its structural connection with the concept of *chorismós* and its crucial role in the theoretical articulation of freedom.

Inspired by Heraclitus, Patočka conceives *Pólemos* as the generative matrix of all conjunction and disjunction. It is the ecstatic movement that engenders differentiation and individuation, yet simultaneously opens onto the agonistic and discordant ground of meaning. *Pólemos* is the ceaseless flux of difference, the dynamic unity of oppositions, encapsulating the problematization inherent in existence. It is at once the power that binds everything and the strife that lies within the tension of manifestation.¹³

In *Negative Platonism*, Patočka locates the roots of the experience of freedom in our experience as historical creatures, an experience he sees as intrinsically linked to the inner, yet concealed, problematization of reality. In the 1970s, through a more

¹⁰ The hypothesis that the Idea of Negative Platonism subsequently finds clarification and translation by conceiving human existence as movement was advanced by the editors of Patočka's letters to V. Richter (see Patočka 2001); conversely, the second hypothesis was advanced by Karfik (2006).

¹¹ Tardivel sees Patočka's phenomenology as a polemology. See Tardivel (2011) "Vers un tournant 'polémologique'?" See also Bernard (2016).

¹² Regarding the centrality of *Pólemos* in Patočka's political thought, see Dodd (2016), and see also Findlay (2002).

¹³ Patočka's reading of Heraclitus is strongly reminiscent of Fink's and Heidegger's interpretations expressed during their famous joint seminar on *Heraclitus*. See Heidegger (2000).

profound analysis of the concepts of history and historicity,¹⁴ he thematizes the break between historical and pre-historical existence as rooted in a fundamentally different apprehension of the problematization of reality.

In reflecting upon this problematization, the Czech philosopher identifies the role of *Pólemos* at the genesis of history and at the heart of reality's meaning. *Pólemos* embodies not only the tension between historical life and life conceived merely as self-perpetuation, but also the problematization as the arena of conflict among differences. This conflict does not culminate in a unified synthesis but enables the dynamic interplay of multiplicity, preserving the mark of distinction between oppositions and, thereby, also preserving their singularity. Therefore, according to Patočka, it is only through embracing one's historicity that the possibility for a concrete experience of freedom as *chorismós* opens.

Hence, he clarifies the nexus between *Pólemos* and freedom thus: "Freedom, therefore, means risk; it signifies a perpetual possibility of error and the necessity of decision-making; it embodies the harshness of contradictions, the necessity to decide about them as if we were sovereign, and yet the impossibility of this sovereignty. Freedom, therefore, signifies the angst before (an apparent) void in which the human being is placed by its fundamental position".¹⁵

The experience of freedom is the experience of the positive negativity of *chorismós* and of a struggle that originates in the problematic nature of reality—a problematization that is intrinsically *Pólemos*. Freedom is in itself risk, which for Patočka means embracing the harshness of contradictions within the agonistic flow of differences, yet accepting the impossibility of mastering them indefinitely. Risk constitutes an intrinsic attribute of human agency, insofar as its finite existence locates the human being in a liminal condition, constantly on the verge of the unpredictable.

Through the concept of *Pólemos*, Patočka's meditations on freedom take on a more political nuance. In *Heretical Essays*, the concept of *Pólemos* emerges prominently in two primary contexts: initially, that of the *polis*, and subsequently, that of war.

In his meditations about history and historicity, Patočka provides a penetrating analysis of Hannah Arendt's dichotomy between *oikos*, the private realm, and *polis*, the public sphere.¹⁶ The advent of the *polis* and the development of communal life give rise to something new and unprecedented: the dimension of both politics and philosophy. For Patočka, the spirit of the *polis* is precisely *Pólemos*—the spirit of the dynamic unity forged in the struggle of differences—and it is *Pólemos* that allows politics to be fundamentally characterized as an agonistic dimension of communal existence (Patočka 1996, 27–52). Through the disruptive opening granted by this agonistic sphere, the human being encounters itself as exposed to the risk intrinsic to the problematization of reality—that is, the risk of embracing the responsibility of its own freedom.

¹⁴ See Patočka (1996), in particular the first and second essays, "Reflections on Prehistory" and "The Beginning of History."

¹⁵ The English translation is mine, original Czech: "Svoboda tedy znamená riziko; znamená ustavičnou možnost omylu a znamená nutnost rozhodování; znamená tvrdost kontradikcí, nutnost rozhodovat o nich, jako bychom byli suverénní, a přitom nemožnost suverenity; znamená tedy úzkost před (zdánlivým) prázdňem, do kterého je člověk svou menzou polohou postaven" (Patočka 2015a, p. 266).

¹⁶ See Arendt (1958).

Ultimately, the concept of *Pólemos* is also fundamental in Patočka's understanding of his present time, particularly about the traumatic events of the wars of the twentieth century. The very title "*The Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War*" immediately highlights the profound tension inherent in the original and "heretical" thesis of the sixth in the *Heretical Essays*. This formulation suggests that Patočka's approach to the conceptualization of war marks a radical departure from the prevailing interpretation of the First and Second World Wars, proposing a distinct paradigm for understanding the pervasive nature of conflict that defined the century.

Patočka's concern moves beyond the causal factors, factual trajectory, or strategic dimension of warfare. Instead, he endeavors to analyze the essential depth of the nexus between war and history, emphasizing not the origins of war but war as origin. At the core of this conceptual reorientation stands the concept of *Pólemos*, which embodies the "heretical" resonance of his thought.

From its inception, the essay articulates the provocative argument that a fundamental change irrevocably marked the twentieth century, a shift for which the First World War was catalyzed, conceived as a "cosmic" and decisive event.¹⁷ The magnitude of the existential and ontological discontinuity precipitated by the Great War is evidenced by its resistance to assimilation within the analytical categories of the nineteenth century. According to Patočka, the fundamental blindness of all previous interpretations of the war resides precisely in their consideration of it from the perspective of peace and life, overlooking its dark and nocturnal aspects.

Through these ideas of the day,¹⁸ the war appears as "an unpleasant but necessary interlude which we need to accept in the interest of certain goals of life's continuity, but in which we can seek nothing "positive" (Patočka 1996, p. 120). On the contrary, to deeply understand the phenomenon of "*the Twentieth century as war*" it is necessary to make a radical shift of perspective towards the Night, towards the war and death itself. This involves recognizing that war inherently possesses an explanatory value, something "positive", not in a moral sense, but within a historical-dialectical dimension.

Viewed through the lens of the Night, the bright ideals of the day reveal their darker aspects, appearing as mere ideological justifications for a process dominated by the transvaluation of all values in the name of the Force. The First World War ratified the transformation of the world into an energetic complex, demonstrating that only through the fierce opposition of conflict can the accumulated technical forces transition from potential to actualization (Patočka 1996, p. 124). From the perspec-

¹⁷ It is important to note that in the Sixth Essay, Patočka does not explicitly distinguish between the First and Second World Wars, but rather views them as substantially continuous, almost a unified phenomenon. In this regard, some objections have highlighted his lack of attention to the specificities of the Second World War, the phenomenon of Nazism, and the Cold War. However, I believe Patočka's continuist perspective stems not from ignorance but from a deliberate theoretical choice to emphasize the essence of war as it manifested in the twentieth century, rather than the extrinsic characteristics of individual war events. Or maybe one could say that for Patočka, there is no philosophical dealing with the Second World War (Hagedorn 2016).

¹⁸ The capitalization of "Day" and "Night" emphasizes their significance for Patočka as two distinct interpretative paradigms, offering divergent perspectives on twentieth century events: one, the mainstream, characterized by linear rationality and fostering notions of progress and biopolitics; the other rooted in an attitude of radical questioning.

tive of the day, Patočka observes the existence of a linear continuation between war and peace: as war is understood as a necessary, yet dramatic, parenthesis to guarantee peace. However, the ideal of the struggle for peace is merely an illusory claim of the forces of the day, as ultimately, Force triumphs, rendering peace just an aspect of war.

For Patočka, the perspective of the Night allows us to understand that in the twentieth century, war is no longer to be regarded as a mere instrument, a tool whose significance derives from a purpose external to the tool itself. Instead, war has become an event imbued with meaning, holding within itself the power of bestowing meaning. Indeed, war has not only shifted its status, becoming the cipher of the twentieth century, but also the very nature of the century, when war is no longer understood as conflict, but rather as the embodiment of an annihilative power. In a world that has translated life into purely energetic terms, all meaning succumbs before raw Force, making the twentieth century wars the clearest manifestation of nihilism. In Patočka's view, war, having become a power of annihilation dominated by the principle of Force, has irrevocably foreclosed its connection to *Pólemos*, thereby eliminating the very space within the dimension of conflict that could guarantee the possibility of the experience of freedom.

Despite their overlapping semantic territories, *Pólemos* and war diverge fundamentally. For Patočka, *Pólemos* is concerned with examining the limits of human possibilities in their relational dimension. Instead, war, especially in the twentieth century, is driven by a destructive passion, eliminating the category of the enemy as a distinct other. Dominated by the ideology of the day, modern understanding has lost the ability to interpret life through the lens of *Pólemos*. Consequently, this has led to the collapse of the very space of conflict where the agonistic interplay of differences, as opposed to annihilation, allowed for the recognition of the other and, ultimately, individuation.

It is precisely in the agonistic terrain of *Pólemos* that the space of freedom can emerge and open. He elucidates: "It is to comprehend that here is where the true drama is being acted out; freedom does not begin only 'afterwards,' after the struggle is concluded, but rather has its place precisely within—it that is the salient point, the highest peak from which we can gain a perspective on the battlefield" (Patočka 1996, p. 134).

For Patočka, freedom finds its place solely in struggle, meaning that it is an experience situated amidst what is—that is, in life and history—and not at a point of arrival or resolution to which disharmonies must be reconciled. Authentic freedom is a polemical freedom that entails grasping contradictions in their jarring tension.

5 Freedom as responsibility: the solidarity of the shaken

In his analysis of the short century's catastrophes in the sixth of the *Heretical Essays*, Patočka endeavors to investigate experiences that transcend the mere self-preservation and biopolitical control inherent to the ideology of the day. This section is dedicated to exploring those dimensions that could lead to discerning the wisdom of *Pólemos*, thereby opening a path to the experience of freedom. Crucially, this part

will demonstrate how freedom, in Patočka's reflections of the 1970s, can be seen as newly understood and articulated as responsibility.

The annihilation of the other and apathy toward death that now define the nature of war have permeated the whole of existence, effectively isolating the human being from its constitutive relationship with the other and immunizing it from the need to investigate the deeper and problematic meaning of reality. However, for Patočka, understanding World Wars through the lens of the Night can open a new perspective, recovering those experiences that retain the capacity of bestowing a meaning other than annihilation. He locates those "islands of meaning" in those experiences capable of profoundly shaking the human being at its core, acting as a binding force that compels one to look directly into the negative.

Paradoxically, the site where this transformative potential can manifest itself is the First World War: the front, which "with its line of fire consists in its evocation of the night in all its urgency and undeniability" (Patočka 1996, p. 129). Insightfully, Patočka delineates the experience of the front as the experience of the peak, as an apex beyond compare, from which all the images of the logic of the day begin to dissipate. From this peak one can grasp the significance of the phenomenon and redirect their gaze toward the Night, a perspective that is both disruptive and liberating. The fundamental existential revelation of the front as the peak lies precisely in this movement of life extending itself into the Night, into the heart of struggle and death, ultimately restoring the human being's consciousness of its own finitude.

Reflecting on the experience of the front inevitably compels confronting the theme of sacrifice, given the countless lives interrupted in the name of a sacrifice for one's homeland. Patočka identifies the front as paradoxically but intrinsically bound to the experience of sacrifice: it embodies the idea of sacrifice as an instrumentalization of life in the biopolitics of the day, yet at the same time it is configured as the place where a transformative understanding of the experience of sacrifice can emerge.¹⁹ At the front, freedom sheds its illusory appearance; authentic freedom, Patočka argues, can only be experienced through the recognition of the Night. Thus, it is manifested as sacrifice, and this is how freedom transcends all concerns of mere survival and peace. Freedom, as an experience of the peak amidst the harshness of battle, is in this sense both a total experience—because it is situated at the heart of the struggle—and a liminal experience, allowing the individual to embark on the oblique path of the Night, the risky path.

According to Patočka, the distressing experience of the front yields another paradox: within its cruel and dia-bolic power—rooted in the Greek meaning of *dia-ballo*, "to divide"—it has the extraordinary capacity to unite. *Pólemos* is the father of all,

¹⁹ The theme of sacrifice emerges as a significant and multifaceted concept within Patočka's philosophical landscape, particularly evident in his reflections and private seminars throughout the 1970s. Its ambiguity and complexity are undeniable, and crucial articulation is found in his Varna Lectures of 1973 (Patočka 2022b). Here, in direct engagement with Husserl's and Heidegger's analyses of technology, Patočka positions sacrifice as a persistent counterpoint to the encroaching technicization of science and the inherent logic of technology. Sacrifice, in this context, embodies an extreme and immeasurable action, a dimension of human existence that fundamentally resists calculability and instrumental rationality. About the concept of sacrifice, see Dodd (2020), Cavalcante-Schuback (2011), and Perryman-Holt (2015). "Sacrifice is needed to bring back a separation, a difference that has been entirely concealed by the modality of beings in the reign of the *Gestell*, namely the ontological difference" (Perryman-Holt 2015).

it is what unites—this is the wisdom of *Pólemos* that the experience of the front allows to emerge. Here, the gaze is oriented directly into the Night, revealing that the space of conflict, distinct from mere annihilation, is where the agonistic interplay of differences can find unity. From this perspective, the enemy is no longer the one to be eliminated but rather the one who shares the same circumstance and discovers absolute freedom alongside us.²⁰ This unveils the abyssal phenomenon of the solidarity of the shaken: solidarity forged between those who have collectively endured the experience of existential collapse and who, by exposing themselves to the possibility of death, have taken responsibility for their own finitude.

He elaborates: “The solidarity of the shaken—shaken in their faith in the day, in ‘life’ and ‘peace’—acquires a special significance, especially in the time of the releasing of Force. Force released is that without which ‘day’ and ‘peace,’ human life defined by a world of exponential growth, cannot exist. The solidarity of the shaken is the solidarity of those who understand. Understanding, though, must in the present circumstances involve not only the basic level, that of slavery and of freedom with respect to life, but needs also to entail an understanding of the significance of science and technology, of that Force we are releasing” (Patočka 1996, p. 135).

From Patočka’s words, one can sense that the solidarity of the shaken transcends a mere pacifist sentiment born from the experience of surviving frontline combat. It is, more fundamentally, a profound understanding: an awareness of both the encompassing influence of Force in the contemporary condition and the recognition that meaning emerges only as irreducible problematicity. This understanding manifests as an abyssal experience, evoking a profound feeling, both epistemological and emotional, akin to the sensation one might encounter when standing on the edge of a vast cliff or at the peak of a mountain. In such a situation, overwhelmed by the complex problematicity of the world, one can acknowledge that reality, inevitably transcending any ideological system, will always be an irreducible excess. The position of the shaken consists in dealing with this unsettling understanding, which enables them to attempt to comprehend and encompass a plurality while remaining aware of its inherent inexhaustibility.

This process of understanding, opened by a liminal experience exemplified by the front, and the ability to recognize this intrinsic excess that defies being contained and collected, corresponds to Patočka’s idea of responsibility. The paradigm of modern rationality, which underpins the ideology of the Day, has obscured the excess of reality’s irreducible problematicity, foreclosing the dimension of responsibility. However, according to Patočka, those who have endured the trauma of the front—a potent symbol of profound existential upheaval—can glimpse beyond the veil of alienating objectification and nihilistic rationalism towards the perspective of the Night, thereby recovering the wisdom of *Pólemos* and the ability to enact this understanding as responsibility.

Consequently, the nuanced thread of the reflections presented in the sixth of the *Heretical Essay* reveals a significant interconnection between the concepts of freedom and responsibility. The experience of freedom, understood as a liminal experience at the core of struggle, is configured as an act of comprehending the irreducible

²⁰ For an insightful analysis of these aspects of the *Heretical Essays*, see Derrida (1995).

negative and polemical dimension of reality. This understanding enables a detachment, a liberation from the constraints of the rationalization of the Day, inherently calling to responsibility. This appeal to responsibility manifests as an ethical imperative of embracing a risky and unsettling perspective, an alternative path that Patočka views as fundamentally collective and holding community potential.

6 Responsibility as freedom: the praxis of dissidence

Another dimension capable of embodying the wisdom of *Pólemos*—thereby disrupting the ideology of the Day and revealing the complex negativity of reality—can be traced in the praxis of dissidence. This final section will examine how Patočka's freedom acquires a more political dimension when viewed through the lens of his experience as a dissident.

Although he meticulously observed and critically analyzed public life and politics, Patočka's intellectual trajectory was consistently grounded in philosophy, without any explicit inclination towards political participation. Therefore, his prominent engagement with Charta 77 was unexpected by many. How might this engagement be interpreted? Certainly, not as a pursuit of political ambitions; rather, it should be understood as an endeavor to translate and enact the ethical-political principles cultivated throughout his lifelong philosophical meditations.²¹

Patočka conceives philosophizing as an intensive praxis—that part of praxis that lights the way through the darkness for the “real” acts and therefore demands as much courage, dedication, and responsibility as those acts themselves (Manton 2007, p. 466). Philosophical reflection is understood as the act of problematizing reality and allowing individuals to resist the inertia of normalized evil.

To reflect upon the *Pólemos* that constitutes our very being is to recognize that the ontology of existence extends beyond mere cognitive value, holding a fundamentally ethical and political significance. Consequently, philosophical reflection, understood as a “thought of dissidence,” possesses the potential to manifest genuine power, both individually and collectively.

Rooted in the overcoming of the premise that all phenomena are equally evident and susceptible to uniform elucidation, this dissident posture endeavors to awaken a consciousness of non-evidence, of the negativity within reality, liberating the power of its latent possibilities from any form of ideological and unilateral subjugation. The thematization of this act of dissident thinking is particularly salient in his later works, *The Spiritual Person and the Intellectual*, and *Two Charta 77 Texts* (Patočka 2022), wherein Patočka's idea of freedom as responsibility acquires a more explicitly political nuance.

In 1975, parallel to his reflections on the solidarity of the shaken and the imperative to cultivate an independent thinking, Patočka dedicated a concise yet profound symposium to the figure of the spiritual person, through which he critically examined the intellectual. He argues that the spiritual person and the intellectual represent distinct yet intertwined existential and ethical postures. The intellectual functions as a

²¹ See Sokol (2007), and Forti (2012, 333–382).

cultural actor or worker, a shaper of a social reality, endowed with specific education and skills. While the spiritual person may engage in similar activities and exhibit a superficial resemblance to the intellectual, a fundamental divergence persists.

The key difference is that the spiritual person can overcome the intellectual's dependence on ordinary societal structures, which attempt to reduce him to a mere functionary of power. The spiritual person grounds his action in independent, unconditioned, and self-determined thought, enabling them to exceed the limitation of the given through an act of questioning, a methodical *epoché* of dogmatic certainties. An approach that Patočka describes as: "[N]ot ignoring negative experiences, but on the contrary, settling into them; problematizing the usual; creating a new life *possibility* from within this open sphere. To live not on firm ground, but rather on something that moves; to live *unanchoredness*" (Patočka 2022, 299).

Crucially, this spiritual posture is not confined to the philosopher, as might be presumed, but rather encompasses every individual, especially technicians and scientists, expert wielders of power, to whom Patočka's moral appeal is most directly addressed.

Two years later, in the essays concerning Charta 77, the independent thought of the spiritual person evolves into an appeal for an autonomous civil society. This more politically engaged turn in Patočka's thought arises from the ethical imperative that when confronted with human rights violations, no individual can absolve themselves of responsibility. Freedom is not something merely given but rather a condition that depends on the responsibility of individuals to pursue alternative paths that actively challenge the imposed "normalization."²²

In Patočka's reflections the figures of the spiritual person and of the dissident are deeply intertwined. The spiritual person embodies an existence perpetually exposed to negativity, characterized by a life that is fundamentally uprooted and unanchored. This very posture cultivates a dissident existence, wherein the act of problematization functions as a dis-objectifying force. Through this force, the dissident manifests his insolubility within the mechanisms of ideology, enacting a practice of resistance from within. The dissident, embodying the spiritual person, confronts and accepts the experience of negativity, assuming responsibility for the inherent problematicity and uprootedness of existence, thus resisting any homogenizing force.

In this way, Patočka thematized an alternative political subjectivity grounded in an *ethos* of responsibility: "The spiritual person is not of course a politician, and it is not political in the usual sense of the word. They are not a party to the dispute that rules this world – but in a different way they are political, obviously, and cannot be apolitical because the *non-self-evident nature of reality* is precisely what they throw into the face of this society and all they find around them" (Patočka 2022, 304).

It emerges that for Patočka the authentic meaning of politics resides in the realm of the unpredictable: a sphere that is fundamentally oriented towards the negativity con-

²² The crushing of the Prague Spring by Soviet intervention in August 1968 initiated a period of political retrenchment known as "normalization," commencing in April 1969. This process entailed the systematic dismantling of the reformist agenda, marked by the gradual ousting of Dubček, extensive purges within the Communist Party, and the suppression of all autonomous social and political organizations. See Skilling (1976) and Rupnik (1989).

stitutive of existence—towards its inherent *Pólemos* and, therefore, its profoundly problematic character.

Ultimately, the liberating power to problematize and distance enables the dissident to “live in truth.” Patočka argues that truth, here, is not conceived as a fixed doctrine, because the spiritual man recognizes its inherent finitude. However, this does not imply its arbitrariness. Rather, truth corresponds to the extent of freedom from unilateral objectivation. We see, then, how for Patočka truth and freedom are intertwined: truth is configured as that problematizing posture of life that is constituted as *ethos*—that is, as ethical freedom, a negative freedom, a *chorismós*, a movement of separation from inherited conceptions, and a challenge to the established normativity.

This *ethos* necessitates a radical assumption of responsibility, a demand that Patočka also formulated as the essential need for the “care for the soul.” The “care for the soul” constitutes the essential praxis of experiencing the negative, serving as the very movement of the soul that gives structure to the mystery of the *chorismós*. Rooted in the force of negativity—which manifests itself in Socratic “learned ignorance”—the care for the soul identifies the consciousness of the problematicity of existence. This self-awareness, in turn, underpins the experience of freedom as risk and responsibility. Consequently, Patočka's intellectual and biographic trajectory reveals that dissidents as practitioners of negative Platonism open a space for the experience of freedom. By embracing the non-self-evident nature of reality, individuals can enact a mode of existence as “living in truth,” which manifests as an act of resistance when confronted with violations of human and civil rights.

7 Conclusions

Viewing Patočka's concept of freedom through a genealogical lens clarifies the conceptual resonances across its multifaceted and evolving layers. Specifically, the analysis demonstrated how the ontological tension of the *chorismós*, developed in *Negative Platonism*, is subsequently historized and dynamized as the existential conflictuality of *Pólemos*. This structural connection reveals how, in Patočka's thought of the 1970s, freedom is ultimately articulated as responsibility, understood as the ethical act of comprehending reality's irreducible, polemical dimension.

In this framework, it becomes clear that Patočka's idea of freedom could offer an enduringly relevant paradigm for our present. By locating freedom within the agonizing terrain of *Pólemos*, Patočka demonstrates that authentic freedom is not found *despite* difference, but because of and in differences, precisely in the tension of the separation (*chorismós*). This perspective provides a foundation for social and political relationships rooted not in dominance or annihilation, but in a true understanding where the agonistic interplay of differences is preserved. This understanding, which recognizes the non-self-evident nature and irreducible problematicity of existence, inherently calls to responsibility.

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