

## The ethical in Jan Patočka’s thought: Sacrifice and care for the soul

Michaela Belejkanicova<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In his two works from the 1970s, Patočka proposes a very personal way that the spiritual crisis, which manifests itself as a techno-scientific reality of *Gestell*, can be overcome. Patočka argues that the only way to escape spiritual decline is through sacrifice. This study examines how the ethical is represented in Patočka’s philosophy. It focuses on his two main concepts of sacrifice and care for the soul and explores the relationship between them. Through a close reading of *Plato and Europe* (1973), ‘Four Seminars’ (1973), and his essay ‘The dangers of technicization’ (1973), this study reveals how Patočka proposes that the ethical can be implemented within the realm of the political. Drawing a parallel between Socrates’ and Patočka’s lives and fates, this study points to the significance of ethics in political life – both in the ancient Greek polis of Socrates’ time and in communist Czechoslovakia in Patočka’s time. This approach highlights the influence that the philosophy of Socrates had on Patočka’s thinking.

**Keywords:** sacrifice, care for the soul, the ethical, Socrates, polis

### Introduction

In his works from the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> Patočka proposes a very personal approach to how the techno-scientific reality in which a human being occurs can be overcome. Based on his critical assessment of Heidegger’s thought, Patočka argues that the only way to undermine the logic of *Gestell*<sup>3</sup> is through absolute detachment from its reasoning. Although Patočka believes that Heidegger’s solution to the spiritual crisis (as *das Rettende*)<sup>4</sup> touches upon the problem of existence and its authenticity at its very centre, Patočka believes this solution is insufficient. Patočka argues that although Heidegger, to an extent, through *das Rettende*, proposes a certain distancing of life from the techno-scientific reality of *Gestell*, the solution has its shortcomings because life does not surrender completely. Instead, life expects some form of ‘*Gunst des Sein*’ (favour of being; Patočka, 2002b, p. 402) in return for its distancing from the reality of *Gestell*, which one finds in the realm of the art and which represents a form of saving grace. Patočka argues that, to confront *Gestell* directly, one needs to prove that “its power [the power of *Gestell*] is not absolute” (Patočka, 2002b, p. 402). Overcoming the techno-scientific reality of *Gestell* is possible only through what Patočka calls self-sacrifice.

<sup>1</sup> University College London (Great Britain); michaela.belejkanicova.11@ucl.ac.uk; ORCID: 0000-0001-8053-4376.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The dangers of technicization in science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of technology as danger according to M. Heidegger’ (1973), known as the ‘Varna lecture’, in the series of lectures *Plato and Europe* (1973) and ‘Four seminars on the problem of Europe’ (1973).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of *Gestell* originates in the philosophy of Heidegger, in his ‘The origin of the work of art’ (Heidegger, 2002, p. 54); ‘Only a God can save us: Der Spiegel’s Interview with Martin Heidegger’ (Heidegger, 1993, p. 107) and ‘On the question of being’ (Heidegger, 1998, p. 313).

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger speaks about *das Rettende* – the saving power – in his essay ‘The question concerning technology’ (Heidegger, 2013, pp. 3–35). As described by Scott, “Heidegger does not speak of saving power as the translation suggests, but of *das Rettende*, which means ‘the freeing and protecting’. *Das Rettende* gives protection to disclosure and hence to human beings when it is recovered in our lineage by freeing the essence of technology. The word saving in this context does not mean retention of something for later purposes, that is, it does not suggest a version of standing reserve. Nor does it suggest a being that causes or does something called saving. The thought of ontological difference is fully in play here, and *das Rettende* does not name a being and certainly does not name a power. Rather a draw of the *Wesen* or essence or coming to pass of technology, a draw in an absence of power, allows an opening that returns things from their retention for use and significance to their unuseful being, to their disclosiveness, their appearing in ceasing to be as they come to be” (Scott, 1996, p. 76).

This paper examines two ethical concepts in Patočka's philosophy: *sacrifice* and *care for the soul* – which are closely intertwined. It aims to reconstruct the concept of sacrifice in Patočka's philosophy and argues that self-sacrifice, as Patočka proposes, represents a complex idea that cannot be reduced to an act of self-immolation.

Patočka's idea of sacrifice is aligned with the conviction that “to philosophise is to learn how to die” (Montaigne, 1965, p. 56). Sacrifice, so conceived, means to leave one's mundane day-to-day existence behind and to live a philosophical life. Self-sacrifice, in Patočka's works, calls for the need to detach oneself from one's secure life and to set oneself on a journey of searching for the truth.

Philosophical sacrifice, however, cannot be understood without another ethical ideal that Patočka proposes in his lectures *Plato and Europe* – care for the soul. The second part of this paper reconstructs this key concept, exploring the links between Socratic teaching and Patočka's philosophy. Helped by Hannah Arendt's analysis of Socrates' fate and the crisis in the polis, this paper critically examines the relevance of the ethical ideal of care for the soul in the political realm – first, concerning the crisis of the Athenian polis; and second, concerning Patočka's situation in communist Czechoslovakia.

The aim of this paper is, first, to reveal how the ethical is represented in Patočka's philosophy and to highlight the influence that the philosophy of Socrates had on shaping Patočka's thought. Second, the paper critically examines how the ethical – as embodied by sacrifice and care for the soul – can be implemented within the realm of the political. The necessity of ethics in politics is questioned, and the significance of ethics in political life is discussed – both in the ancient Greek polis in Socrates' times and in communist Czechoslovakia in Patočka's times.

### The Crisis

Patočka introduces the concept of sacrifice in an obscure context. He argues that humanity occurs in a state of *spiritual* crisis that stems from the strong tendencies of the *one-sided rationality* of modern techno-science. Life is perceived through calculation and measurement, and the meaning of the world is formalised and reduced to mathematical formulae. To translate this tendency into the political realm, Patočka speaks about the 20<sup>th</sup> century being a century of war. He believes that the one-sided rationality of modern techno-science was played out for the first time in World War I. To demonstrate this view, he discusses the powerful frontline experience. Since World War I, Patočka believes, people have been living in a crisis that takes the form of an ongoing war – a ‘smouldering war’ (Patočka, 1996, p. 133) – that awaits another violent outburst.

These views may seem extremely gloomy, if not exaggerated. However, reading Patočka's works from the late 1970s, one needs to consider the situation and context in which Patočka was writing his essays: under the totalitarian regime of communism in Czechoslovakia. During his life, Patočka witnessed the Nazi and the Soviet occupations. He lived during the era of the Cold War, when the threat of war as another outbreak of violence was realistically present.

The danger of techno-science, Patočka writes, does not reside in the possibility of a human being becoming enslaved by techno-science<sup>5</sup> – Patočka is not concerned about that. Instead, explaining the world and human life through rigorous science and mathematical formulae is an obstacle to humans having access, “to what he [man] himself is – a being capable of standing in an original relation to truth” (Patočka, 1996, p. 133). A human being only recognises partial

---

<sup>5</sup> “And therein precisely lies the danger. The uncovering that prevails at the essential core of technology necessarily loses sight of uncovering itself, concealing the essential core of truth in an unfamiliar way and so closing man's access to what he himself is – a being capable of standing in an original relation to truth. Among all the securing, calculating, and using raw materials, that which makes all this possible is lost from view – man henceforth knows only individual, practical truths, not the truth” (Patočka, 1989, p. 331).

and individual truths, as enabled by rigorous science, measurement, and calculations, leading to a distorted picture of reality, meaning one lives in a world vulnerable to manipulation. Patočka, therefore, questions how this spiritual crisis that humans live in can be overcome. In other words, how can human beings restore their relationship with truth? How can they obtain the lost access to what they themselves are?

Patočka was deeply influenced by his predecessors Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In his essay 'The dangers of technicization' (1973), Patočka critically examines his predecessors' reflections on techno-science and points out the shortcomings of their proposed solutions to the spiritual crisis. He argues that the spiritual crisis cannot be overcome by the mere restructuring of the European sciences under one overarching and all-encompassing spiritual science – philosophy (or *Philosophia prima*),<sup>6</sup> as proposed by Husserl – as only philosophy can undermine the one-sided rationality that the philosophy of positivism promotes. He likewise claims that it cannot be overcome by turning to the traditional forgotten question of Being as proposed by Heidegger<sup>7</sup> or by turning to the realm of art (*das Rettende*). Patočka claims that there must be a much more radical solution. He seeks a way to escape the crisis and finds this exit precisely in the concept of sacrifice: “[S]acrifices represent a persistent presence of something that does not appear in the calculation of the technological world” (Patočka, 1989, p. 337). Furthermore, sacrifice “demonstrates what technology denies, the reality of a hierarchy, of something higher” (Kohák, 1989, p. 116). Patočka is not referring to the Christian God here; there is something beyond the world of techno-science, beyond calculation and measurement – the *spirit*, the *soul*, something that defines a human being. Only sacrifice repeatedly reveals the soul and, thus, responds to the formalism of the techno-scientific world. Only sacrifice restores the broken relationship of what humans are – beings capable of standing in an original relationship to truth. Sacrifice paves the way for human beings to recover the lost relationship to themselves and to what they themselves are.

### Sacrifice

Sacrifice is a highly complex concept with a variety of meanings: from ancient Greek mythology (Prometheus), the Old Testament (the case of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac), and the New Testament (the *kenotic* idea of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ); from philosophy (sacrifice as dying for ideas: Socrates, Hypatia, and Giordano Bruno); and from more recent history (Maximilian Kolbe or Jan Palach). What does Patočka mean when he speaks of sacrifice?

Patočka did not devote an entire study to examining the concept of sacrifice. When Patočka speaks about sacrifice, he speaks about self-sacrifice, self-surrender, self-giving (Patočka, 1996, p. 129). He is convinced that “life is not everything, that it can sacrifice itself. That self-sacrifice, that surrender, is what is called for” (Patočka, 1996, p. 120). He encourages humans to sacrifice in the sense that he encourages them to leave their mundane lives behind to live a philosophical life. However, he does not mean a sacrifice for another person or for a particular thing (e.g., dying for a country). Patočka states that it is the sacrifice for nothing and no one, yet at the same time, in a certain sense, it is a sacrifice for everything and for all.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Husserl's *first philosophy* (*Erste Philosophie, Philosophia prima*) refers to “the self-grounding, self-justifying presuppositionless science of all science, namely phenomenology” (Moran & Cohen, 2012, p. 125). The first philosophy is not only another discipline that would encompass and ground all other disciplines and sciences; Husserl perceives it as an entirely different and peculiar form of thinking that is unique and distinctive from all other forms (Sokolowski, 2010, p. 4).

<sup>7</sup> “This question has today been forgotten – although our time considers itself progressive in again affirming ‘metaphysics’” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 2).

<sup>8</sup> “[S]acrifice acquires a remarkably radical and paradoxical form. It is not a sacrifice for something or for someone, even though in a certain sense it is a sacrifice for everything and for all. In a certain essential sense, it is a sacrifice for nothing, if thereby we mean that which is not existing particular” (Patočka, 1989, p. 337).

Patočka, in his discussion on the concept, argues that one cannot expect anything in return for sacrifice (Patočka, 1989, p. 339). Sacrifice neither promises any ultimate changes in the concrete world nor guarantees anything regarding the future prospects of humanity. It leads to neither the wellbeing of future generations nor the fame of those sacrificed (Patočka, 2004, p. 419). None of these abovementioned factors is sacrifice's objective. Patočka strongly emphasises this aspect, warning that if these were the ambitions of sacrifice, it would nullify itself. Sacrifice, therefore, generates a meaning for itself in the moment of its occurrence, and its outcome is highly contingent on its nature.

To understand Patočka's idea of self-sacrifice, one cannot reduce it only to an act of dying, to an act of self-immolation. This idea is not what Patočka has in mind when he speaks about sacrifice. Sacrifice, for Patočka, is not a one-off act of rebellion. Perceived in the broader context of Patočka's academic scholarship and his life, sacrifice is a 'mode of living' (Patočka, 1996, p. 140). Sacrifice is risking one's life and body while being entirely open to the possibility of death (Patočka, 1996, p. 129). The concept entails living one's life as sacrifice.

In his reasoning, Patočka is led by a conviction that a human being, throughout their existence, focuses exclusively on life and fears death. Patočka is a thinker who does not regard death as the negation of life (Patočka, 1996, p. 129). Influenced by Plato, Patočka agrees that death is an unavoidable lot that humanity tends to ignore (Patočka, 1996, p. 17). However, death is inseparable from life, and no one is replaceable in the moment of dying: "because in the confrontation with death and in coming to terms with nothingness it takes upon itself what we all must carry out in ourselves, where no one can take our place" (Patočka, 1996, p. 107). The ambition to deny death, to live as if death does not exist and does not concern us, leads to an inauthentic life and to spiritual decline.<sup>9</sup>

Patočka belongs to the cohort of thinkers who share the conviction, which echoes throughout the entire history of philosophy, that "to philosophise is to learn how to die" (Montaigne, 1965, p. 56). In the dialogue *Phaedo*, for instance, Plato argues that philosophy is a "preparation for death" (*meletē thanatou*; Plato, 1998, p. 34). The main task of philosophy is "to cultivate the appropriate attitude towards death" (Critchley, 2008, p. xxi). Philosophy prepares us to face the terror of annihilation without offering promises of an afterlife. It becomes a movement of liberation that releases people from the given political order.

Inspired by Plato, in his *Heretical essays*, Patočka describes philosophy as care for death, or *meletē thanatou*, as follows:

Another important moment is that the Platonic philosopher overcame death fundamentally by not fleeing from it but by facing up to it. This philosophy was *meletē thanatou*, care for death; care for the soul is inseparable from care for death, which becomes the true care for life; life (eternal) is born of this direct look at death (perhaps it is nothing but this 'overcoming') (Patočka, 1996, p. 105).

Patočka argues that the famous dictum "to philosophise is to learn how to die" can be best explained by Plato's approach to one's death, namely that the only way to 'overcome' death is to embrace it and care for it, as care for death is identical to and 'inseparable' from care for life. However, to achieve this mindset, this new and liberating mode of life, one is called to separate

---

<sup>9</sup> In his *Heretical essays*, Patočka depicts a strong political aspect in the effort to diminish death (Patočka, 1996, p. 129). What he observes is that the motif of ignoring death and solely celebrating life is very common to all ideologies – be they fascism, communism, or liberalism. This approach is commonly misused as a biopolitical tool of surveillance. Ideologies create an illusion that life and death are separate. Life represents the highest value a human being can possess, whereas death is demonised and represents an undesired break of life. Human beings live in the illusion that it is life – mundane, everyday life – that is worth living. Death represents a threat for human beings; therefore, everything outside the norm can be punished by death. Loss of everydayness and death are feared, and humanity is kept under surveillance.

oneself from the everyday, mundane life. One is called to sacrifice oneself and open up to living a philosophical life in the Platonic sense.

The old wisdom of “to philosophise is to learn how to die” entails two aspects closely intertwined with Patočka’s thought:

1. That philosophy is not an academic enterprise, a solely descriptive activity. Instead, philosophy is a performative act of self-giving.
2. That philosophy is the *openness* and *willingness* to search for truth and to see things as they are. Philosophy means to take on one’s responsibility for the world and for others by inspiring them to do the same (Melançon, 2013, p. 580).

The self-sacrifice Patočka discusses, therefore, represents a form of philosophical sacrifice, a mode of living that one adopts by opening up to the reality of the world and oneself. One deliberately distances oneself from the mundane, day-to-day existence and immerses oneself in the world as it truly manifests itself. One sacrifices oneself and sets oneself on a journey of the philosophical life, which is not the life of pleasure and hedonism, but is burdened by responsibility for the world and for the others. One receives nothing for self-sacrifice. Instead, self-sacrifice as living a philosophical life may entail death. It may bring discomfort to a community and may become a highly dangerous enterprise for both the philosopher and the corrupted city.

### Socrates and care for the soul

There are many examples of this form of sacrifice (sacrifice as living a philosophical life) in the history of philosophy: Hypatia, Giordano Bruno, and Simone Weil – philosophers who searched for truth and remained open to the possibility of death. However, probably the most exemplary case of sacrifice as living a philosophical life, which influenced Patočka immensely, was that of Socrates.

Plato devotes only four dialogues to the events of Socrates’ trial and death: *Eutyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. In *Phaedo*, “Socrates’ words are suffused with Plato’s Pythagorean belief in the immortality of the soul” (Critchley, 2008, p. xvii). Plato’s *Apology* offers a rather different view; in it, Socrates says that death is not something to be feared. For Socrates, death does not represent a danger, despite the authorities of the polis attempting to create this illusion, so they can place both the body and the soul under surveillance. As Socrates says in his *Apology*, death is one of two possibilities: “either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another” (Plato, 2019, p. 45).

Patočka examines Socrates’ fate in the series of lectures *Plato and Europe* (1973). In a state of war, during the period of the crisis of the polis, in political conditions highly reminiscent of Patočka’s own situation, Socrates walks around Athens and talks to fellow citizens. He engages in dialogues with people and undermines the opinions of those who falsely assume that they know what is good:

[Socrates] shakes up the certainty on the basis of which the city has existed hitherto, and at the same time he does not say what is good, he only invites people to *think*, that they think like him, that they search, that everyone *responsibly* examine their every thought. That means that they should not accept mere opinion [*doxa*], as if it were insight, as if it were a looking-in [nahlédnutí] – to live from true insight into what is here, what is present (Patočka, 2002a, p. 85).

What concerns Patočka is the Socratic message of the constant search for truth versus widespread opinion (*doxa*). Socrates questions – ‘shakes up’ – the certainty upon which the city

has existed and promotes the principle of humanity, namely that “it is better to undergo injustice than commit it” (Patočka, 2002a, p. 84). However, in doing so, Socrates avoids any moral judgement. He promotes this principle not by simply moralising, preaching, and persuading people about what is morally good. Socrates, as Arendt points out, “did not want to educate the citizens” (Arendt, 2005, p. 15); instead, he encouraged citizens to analyse every thought carefully, to think critically, and to search for truth. Socrates encouraged citizens to question all the ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ that one takes for granted without any critical assessment.

Arendt argues that the search for truth has its role to play in the development of political life, as it undermines and shakes up opinion (*doxa*) and the tyrannical establishment in which it operates:

The method of doing this is *dialegesthai*, talking something through, but this dialectic brings forth truth not by destroying *doxa* or opinion, but on the contrary by revealing *doxa* in its own truthfulness (Arendt, 2005, p. 15).

Examining Arendt’s essay “Socrates’ reveals that the aim of Socrates was not to deny opinion as *doxa*, but rather to bring forth what is truthful in it. Therefore, the aim of Socrates was ‘to improve [citizens’] *doxai*, which constituted the political life in which he took part” (Arendt, 2005, p. 15). His ambition was “to make the city more truthful by delivering each of the citizens of their truths” (Arendt, 2005, p. 15).

In contrast to Arendt’s idea of *dialegesthai*, Patočka becomes more specific and unfolds this practice of restlessly undermining *doxa* and a constant search for truth as the practice of what he calls *care for the soul*:

Because man, or the human soul – that which knows about the whole of the world and of life, that which is able to present this whole before its eyes, that which lives from this position, that which knows about the whole and in that sense is wholly and in the whole within this explicit relation to something certainly immortal, that which is certainly eternal, that which does not pass away beyond which there is nothing – in this itself has its own eternity (Patočka, 2002a, p. 13).

Care for the soul, following Patočka’s quote, makes one’s soul reliable and stable. In a sense, one’s soul maintains its truthfulness and integrity. Care for the soul, for Patočka, does not represent “a kind of pallid intellectualism” (Patočka, 2002a, p. 87); instead, it “is the attempt to embody what is eternal within time, and within one’s own being” (Patočka, 2002a, p. 87). Therefore, care for the soul represents an ‘internal’ activity through which the soul undergoes “the formation of the soul itself by itself” (Patočka, 2002a, p. 93). The soul, through its agency of care, becomes less vulnerable to myths, lies, untruths, and conspiracies and perceives and critically assesses the world and all the phenomena in it.

The soul that both Plato and Patočka refer to is not identical to the Christian soul or the soul described in psychology. Both Plato and Patočka refer to the ancient Greek concept of the soul, which represents the subject of emotional, mental, and psychological states and functions, and is the bearer of moral qualities and virtues, such as justice (*δικαιοσύνη*) and courage (*ἀνδρεία*). Influenced by Democritus’ and Plato’s examinations of the soul, for Patočka, the soul is the ability of rational critical insight and the possibility to see things as a whole. Care for the soul, Patočka argues, equips a person with a new perspective that stands in opposition to the mainstream vision and is even resistant to it.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> “This experience of the soul about it itself discovers at the same time there exists a depth of being, which we unveil only when we swim against the natural current and against all general tendencies of our mind and all our instinctive equipment directed to reality, to materialness” (Patočka, 2002, p. 125).

Based on the Socratic dialectic method, care for the soul occurs through constant questioning (Patočka, 2002a, p. 91). Care for the soul manifests itself as an inner dialogue and critical judgement, which is the basis for all further moral action. The concept has the form of a conversation that is ordinarily divided between two persons, but it can also take place within the core of the soul itself (Patočka, 2002a, p. 91). The human being, through care for the soul, returns to what they are in their nature – namely, a being in whom the world and all phenomena manifest themselves. The objective of care for the soul is the new formation of oneself through the agency of the human soul into ‘looking-in’ (*nahlédnutí*). Patočka discusses the possibility of the formation of a new subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> Care for the soul, however, is not dependent on any external power or third party; it comes from within, and every individual has power over their soul.

Patočka argues that the Socratic dialectic moves beyond being a mere method and becomes, instead, a form of existence. He regards Socrates as the first person who challenged tyranny and the old morality by questioning and undermining the seeming truth about authorities:

Socrates does not provoke by his care for the soul. [...] He does not provoke, but his whole existence is a provocation to the city. He is the first who, face to face with secret tyranny and the hypocritical remains of old morality, poses the thought that the human being focused on truth in the full sense of the word, examining what is good, not knowing himself what is positive good, and only refuting false opinion, has to appear as the worst of all, the most irritating (Patočka, 2002a, p. 87).

Via his dialectical method of investigation and constant questioning, Socrates reveals what is supposed to remain hidden from ordinary citizens – the truth about the polis. Therefore, the significance of Socrates, for Patočka, resides precisely in Socrates’ ability to challenge and resist tyrannical power using nothing but the dialectic itself.

Patočka states that Socrates and his dialectic represent a danger for both authorities and philosophers themselves.<sup>12</sup> The role of a philosopher as proposed by Socrates, however, differs from the suggestion introduced in Plato’s *Republic*<sup>13</sup> – namely, to govern the city, to become a philosopher-king. Patočka, following Socrates, argues that the role of a philosopher is not to “rule over others” (Patočka, 2002a, p. 207). As Arendt, in her essay on Socrates, argues, “The role of philosopher, then, is not to rule the city but to be its ‘gadfly’, not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful” (Arendt, 2005, p. 15). Stemming from the Socratic dialectic, the aim of the philosopher’s political function is to encourage citizens to search for truth and to strive for a city that guarantees freedom for all citizens – even citizens such as Socrates. As Patočka argues,

In what way can a philosopher who is in such dire straits help others? In a philosophical way, through the outline of a city, where the philosopher can live, where the man who is to care for the soul can live, the man who is to carry out the philosophical thought

---

<sup>11</sup> “This new thought, this completely new ideal, that everything man does and thinks has to be answered for in this kind of way, means a new forming of the self, a new forming of that which man, so to speak, is by nature a being to whom the world shows itself, manifests itself. In some way, this forming is within our power; we form ourselves in some kind of way” (Patočka, 2002, p. 95).

<sup>12</sup> “For without a doubt, the care for the soul in a lawless city endangers a human being, it endangers the kind of being that stands for the care of the soul, just as that being endangers the city. And it is altogether logical that the city then treats it accordingly” (Patočka, 2002, pp. 85–86).

<sup>13</sup> “There is nothing inherently impossible in the idea of a philosopher ruler. Philosophers might gain political power, or an existing ruler might become a philosopher; and the public would soon be persuaded of the benefits of philosophic rule. But the philosophic training must be the right one, and the changes in society would have to be radical” (Plato, 1963, p. 259).

that it is necessary to live and think on the basis of looking-in [*nahlédnutí*], nothing else but that (Patočka, 2002a, p. 88).

With this argument, Patočka clearly steps beyond the political realm and moves into the ethical. Patočka disagrees with Plato and, like Aristotle, expresses a preference for the philosopher not as a political figure, but as an ethical figure, as a person who strives for the highest and the divine (Patočka, 2002a, p. 207) – for the truth. For Patočka, it is precisely the divine that becomes the measure of the city.

To sacrifice in the sense of living a philosophical life is identical to the ideal of care for the soul. To sacrifice means to leave the secure realm of the private, mundane life behind and, instead, journey into the realm of the constant ‘shaking’ that the public sphere entails. Patočka, however, clearly argues that care for the soul is the solid foundation of the polis (Patočka, 2002a, p. 88). This point recalls Machiavelli’s words, which stand in stark contradiction to those of Patočka: “I love my native city more than I love my own soul” (Machiavelli, 1989, p. 1010). Machiavelli realises that love of the country and of community should be a driving force for citizens to suppress their personal needs and to desire the higher good of the community. However, he is also aware that this ambition would be realisable only in a perfect world, which is too difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. As Machiavelli suggests in his other work, *The Prince*, greatness of the city depends on the behaviour of a great leader, who is not always a morally good one, yet helps the citizens to forget the failures and successes of the previous leader. He speaks about the individual morality of the Prince, which is superior to the higher good.

In contrast to Machiavelli’s ideas, care for the soul, as Patočka argues, is a foundation for one’s thoughts, for our acting morally in the city. Thanks to the moral foundation that care for the soul facilitates, a city can be outlined in which the citizens who care for the soul can live and cultivate the city through ‘looking-in’ [*nahlédnutí*]:

That is the city where Socrates and those like him will not need to die. For this a world of experience is needed; for this a plan of what is truth is needed, an outline of all being. For this a city must be planned out. What is its essence, and what the soul is capable must be examined. That is the meaning of the figure of Socrates (Patočka, 2002a, p. 88).

Patočka, however, argues that care for the soul in the city is a dangerous enterprise for a philosopher. This is because care for the soul in the corrupted city places humans in danger and, conversely, the citizens who care for their souls undermine the stability of the lawless city and, thus, endanger the city. This situation was precisely the case with Socrates: the city levelled two charges against him – “corrupting the youth of Athens and failing to acknowledge gods” (Critchley, 2008, p. 20) – and he was sentenced to death. Care for the soul equipped Socrates with openness and integrity; not even death represented an obstacle to remaining loyal to truth, his ideals, and his convictions.

### **Philosophy and politics**

In his examination of the decline of the polis and Socrates’ fate, Patočka points to a twofold problem:

The contemporary decline of the Athenian community is, as we know, represented by the fate of Socrates. Socrates’ fate is for Plato the criterion, from which it is clearly evident that the contemporary city that wants to be traditional is no longer capable of this today, and in reality, latent tyrannical opinion rules over it (Patočka, 2002a, p. 110).

Following Plato, Patočka states that, after the death of Socrates, a traditional community was no longer possible. Moreover, the community (polis) became vulnerable to the tyranny of opinion (doxa). On the one hand, Patočka observes that the fate of Socrates played an essential role in the development of European thought, namely that his fate (sacrifice) ignited the beginning of a political community: “Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life [...]” (Arendt, 2005, p. 6). On the other hand, concerning the development of the political situation in Athens itself, the death of Socrates caused the polis to spiral into a crisis (Arendt, 2005, p. 26).

Patočka examines the relationship between politics and philosophy in Socratic teaching. He argues that Socrates revealed that being disinterested and unconcerned about the truth, or a passive acceptance of opinion (doxa) in which a political reality is rooted, causes society to become vulnerable and open to tyrannical rule: “[Socrates’] revealing of others’ ignorance is based on revealing their secret dispositions for tyranny. Athenian democracy is, in fact, eaten through with the poison of tyrannical learnings” (Arendt, 2005, p. 85). Although Socrates was, above all, a philosopher who did not take political action, his philosophical method significantly impacted the political realm.

Arendt examines the relationship between politics and philosophy in Socrates’ teaching, observing that he does not emphasise political action as much as he stresses thought – philosophy itself: “The underlying assumption of this teaching is thought and not action, because only in thought can the dialogue of the two-in-one be realised” (Arendt, 2005, p. 23). Socrates calls for the importance of thought and philosophy to be recognised, because only thought can reveal the truth about phenomena. The search for truth reveals what is supposed to remain hidden and destroys “the specific political reality of the citizens” (Arendt, 2005, p. 25). Therefore, it is thoughts (not actions) that undermine and ‘shake’ the illusionary character of the political reality and reveal the it as it is. Socrates aims to “make philosophy relevant for the polis” (Arendt, 2005, p. 26). His ambition is not to demonstrate “how philosophy looks from the viewpoint of politics, but how politics, the realm of human affairs, looks from the viewpoint of philosophy” (Arendt, 2005, p. 31). Furthermore, Socrates wishes to “discover in the realm of philosophy those standards which are appropriate for a city” (Arendt, 2005, p. 31).

However, the aim of Socrates, in this respect, is not to transform the city radically through a political coup d’état. Instead, he aims to *improve* the city, to implement those philosophical standards and values that guarantee freedom for its citizens and philosophers, to create a city where philosophers would be left alone and their freedom to think would be protected by the authorities of the state.<sup>14</sup>

Patočka discusses the relevance of care for the soul in the city, arguing that the concept aims to create a city, a community, in which freedom and justice are at its very centre. Similar to Arendt, Patočka calls for a society, a state, in which people are not persecuted for their ideas, for their thoughts, for their efforts to express what they think, for their critical thinking, or for their criticism of political authorities.

Although Patočka analyses the Greek polis via decontextualisation and the transference of these arguments, he uses his examination of Socrates to criticise the political situation in Czechoslovakia. Patočka draws some parallels between the decline of the ancient Greek polis and the spiritual crisis in Czechoslovakia. He claims that, in both cases, the citizens are, in a way, satisfied with the opinion (doxa) regarding the political situation, which makes the political realm vulnerable to tyranny – in the modern case, to the rhetoric and apparent reality of the totalitarian communist regime. Patočka states that there is a lack of responsibility in both

---

<sup>14</sup> “The only thing that philosophers from then on wanted with respect to politics was to be left alone; and the only thing they demanded of government was protection for their freedom to think” (Arendt, 2005, p. 26).

cases, not only because of ignorance and conformity among citizens, but also due to their fear of the political authorities.

Patočka believes that the higher, the eternal, and the virtuous (which care for the soul represents) can resist decline so that one can express one's disagreement with one's situation and challenge one's position and fate. As Findlay argues, Greek philosophy is "a conscious decision no longer to accept life and its inevitable decline as simply given" (Findlay, 2002, p. 59). Greek philosophy, with its ideal of care for the soul, teaches humans to reject a life in decline (Findlay, 2002, p. 59). Greek philosophy and its relation to the eternal discovered human freedom (Findlay, 2002, p. 59), in what its significance resides. This simple expression of resistance that care for the soul represents, and the effort to not accept things as they are, plants the seeds of freedom. Care for the soul in the city strives for a free society. It is an act of resistance that, by having reached something higher and something eternal, can improve the city.

Patočka discusses the freedom of spirit that care for the soul provides. Without care for the soul, spiritual freedom would be unthinkable: "[T]he course of our lives [...] is determined by our pursuit of the higher movement or our capitulation to the lower" (Findlay, 2002, p. 60). A human, so conceived, faces an opportunity to choose a mode of life. One can be either content with the lower (the decline) or say 'no!' to the lower and open oneself to eternity. The latter, however, is mediated only through the agency of self-sacrifice and care for the soul.

The freedom of care for the soul reveals the world in its full problematicity. However, what does this mean for a human? Havel offers one answer in his essay 'The Power of the Powerless'. In the essay, he offers the example of the greengrocer, who lives a secure, nonproblematic life, yet exists in a state of complete moral and spiritual decline (Havel, 2010, p. 21). The greengrocer does not care for his soul. He fulfils the duty of an obedient citizen serving the ideology of communism, fulfilling its rituals regularly. Although the greengrocer does not agree with the ideology of communism, he performs all these rituals to live a secure and undisturbed life – to remain safe from the political authorities. Slavoj Žižek would even argue that the greengrocer is living a relatively happy life.<sup>15</sup> Although the life of a greengrocer is not the life of freedom and of one's moral integrity, it is what Milan Kundera would identify with his idea of unbearable lightness (Kundera, 2000, p. 119) – accepting a lack of meaning in one's existence for the sake of temporary pleasure, utility, or simply for the sake of living a secure life, as in the case of Havel's greengrocer. Care for the soul disturbs and shakes this unbearable lightness. To provide meaning to one's existence, care for the soul burdens an individual with responsibility. Although life in care for the soul is the life in truth, it does not offer an easy way out. It is not a state in which pain and suffering disappear instantly. The freedom that care for the soul reveals does not grant happiness to a human. What Patočka proposes through self-sacrifice and the ideal of care for the soul is the effort to step out of one's

---

<sup>15</sup> "In a country like Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s and 1980s, people actually were in a way happy. Three fundamental conditions of happiness were fulfilled there: 1. Their material needs were basically satisfied – not too well satisfied, since the excess of consumption can in itself generate unhappiness. It is good to experience a brief shortage of some goods on the market from time to time (no coffee for a couple of days, then no beef, then no TV sets): these brief periods of shortage functioned as exceptions, which reminded people that they should be glad that such goods were generally available – if everything is available all the time, people take this availability as an evident fact of life and no longer appreciate their luck. Thus life went on in a regular and predictable way, without any great efforts or shocks; one was allowed to withdraw into one's own private world. 2. A second – extremely important – feature: there was the Other (the Party) to be blamed for everything that went wrong, so that one did not feel truly responsible – if there was a temporary shortage of some goods, even if a storm caused great damage, it was "their" fault. 3. And – last, but not least – there was an Other place (the consumerist West) which one was allowed to dream about, and even visit sometimes – this place was just at the right distance: not too far away, not too near" (Žižek, 2002, pp. 58–60).

comfort zone, to live philosophically, as Socrates did – to live an authentic life in *problematicity*, with the burden of responsibility.

### Conclusion

This paper has examined Patočka's idea of the ethical within his philosophy, namely his two ethical categories: sacrifice and care for the soul. The paper has explained their origin and analysed their significance and relevance in the political realm. It has argued that sacrifice, as described by Patočka, critically reacts to the techno-scientific reality of Gestell by reviving the lost access of a human to the truth. Inspired by Socrates' teaching and his philosophical method of constant questioning, Patočka proposes a form of philosophical sacrifice that entails an absolute openness to one's finiteness and one's possibility of death. This form of sacrifice involves a detachment from life, from the misleading perception that life is the highest value one can possess and replaces this assumption with the call to search for the truth.

It aimed to portray the necessity of philosophical sacrifice in the political realm. It argued that the idea of philosophical sacrifice represents neither the heroic moment of self-immolation nor an act of rebellion against political authorities. The significance of the Socratic philosophical sacrifice resides in it being aligned with the truth. Sacrifice, Patočka proposes, strives for the truth, integrity of thought, and critical insight – those aspects inevitable for the political realm as such.

It also argued that philosophical sacrifice does not reject another ethical ideal Patočka proposes – care for the soul, the main aim of which is to search for the truth and critically question the world and all phenomena. Its political relevance resides, first, in its agency to undermine the opinion (*doxa*) and reveal the truth about phenomena. Care for the soul, with its restless questioning, helps to reveal myths, untruths, and conspiracies within the political realm. It also helps to reveal demagoguery, the rhetoric of populism, and political decisions based on passions and emotions.

However, the ideal of care for the soul was not only necessary in times of crisis in both the Athenian polis and communist Czechoslovakia; this study has aimed to decontextualise these ethical principles of sacrifice and care for the soul from the environment of the ancient Greek polis and communist Czechoslovakia and to translate Patočka's abstract ideas into more concrete political terms of today. The analysis of Patočka's ethical principles regarding their foundation, aim, and purpose has helped to reveal their importance within the political realm.

### References

- ARENDDT, H. (2005): Socrates. In: J. Kohn (ed.): *The promise of politics*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 5–39.
- BRADATAN, C. (2015): *Dying for ideas: The dangerous lives of the philosophers*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- CRITCHLEY, S. (2008): *The book of dead philosophers*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- FINDLAY, E. (2002): *Caring for the soul in a postmodern age: Politics and phenomenology in the thought of Jan Patočka*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- HAVEL, V. (2010): The power of the powerless. In: J. Kean (ed.): *The power of the powerless, citizens against the state in Central Eastern Europe*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 10–60.
- HEIDEGGER, M. (1993): Only a God can save us: Der Spiegel's interview with Martin Heidegger. In: R. Wolin (ed.): *The Heidegger controversy: A critical reader*. London & Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 91–116.
- HEIDEGGER, M. (1998): *Pathmarks*, trans. W. McNeil. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- HEIDEGGER, M. (2002): *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. J. Young & K. Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HEIDEGGER, M. (2010): *Being and time*, trans. J. Stambaugh. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- HEIDEGGER, M. (2013): *The question concerning technology and other essays*, trans. W. Lowitt. New York: Harper Collins Publisher.
- KOHÁK, E. (1989): *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and selected writings*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- KUNDERA, M. (1984/2000): *The unbearable lightness of being*, trans. M. H. Heim. New York & London: Faber and Faber.
- MACHIAVELLI, N. (1989): *The chief works and others, Volume 2*, trans. A. Gilbert. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- MELANÇON, J. (2013): Jan Patočka's Sacrifice: Philosophy as dissent. In: *Continental Philosophy Review*, 46(4), pp. 577–602.
- MORAN, D. & COHEN, J. (2012): *The Husserl dictionary*. London & New York: Bloomsbury.
- MONTAIGNE, M. (1965): *The complete essays of Montaigne*, trans. D. M. Frame. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- PATOČKA, J. (1989): The dangers of technicization in science according to E. Husserl and the essence of technology as danger according to M. Heidegger. In: E. Kohák (ed.): *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and selected writings*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 327–339.
- PATOČKA, J. (1996): *Heretical essays in the philosophy of history*, ed. J. Dodd & trans. E. Kohák. Chicago & La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- PATOČKA, J. (2002a): *Plato and Europe*, trans. P. Lom. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- PATOČKA, J. (2002b): Čtyři semináře k problému Evropy [Four seminars on the problem of Europe]. In: I. Chvatík & P. Kouba (eds.): *Sebrané spisy svazek 3: Péče o duši III [Collected Writings Volume 3: Care of the Soul III]*. Prague: Oikoymenh, pp. 374–423.
- PATOČKA, J. (2004): Zpěv výsostnosti [Singing of the Highness]. In: D. Vojtěch & I. Chvatík (eds.): *Umění a čas I. [Art and Time I]*. Prague: Oikoymenh, pp. 416–430.
- PLATO (1963): *The Republic*. London: Penguin Books.
- PLATO (1989): *Phaedo*, trans. E. Brann, P. Kalkavage & E. Salem. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- PLATO (2019): *The trial and death of Socrates*. Logos Books.
- SCOTT, CH. E. (1996): *On the advantages and disadvantages of ethics and politics*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- SOKOLOWSKI, R. (2010): Husserl on first philosophy. In: C. Ierna, H. Jacobs & F. Mattens (eds.): *Philosophy, phenomenology, sciences: Essays in commemoration of Edmund Husserl*. Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London & New York: Springer, pp. 3–23.
- ŽIŽEK, S. (2002): *Welcome to the dessert of the real: Five essays on September 11 and related dates*. London & New York: Verso, pp. 58–82.