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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/bergsoniana/1185>

DOI: [10.4000/bergsoniana.1185](https://doi.org/10.4000/bergsoniana.1185)

ISSN: 2800-874X

Publisher

Société des amis de Bergson

Electronic reference

Débora Morato Pinto, "Jan Patočka, Bergson's careful reader?", *Bergsoniana* [Online], 3 | 2023, Online since 01 July 2023, connection on 12 June 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/bergsoniana/1185>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/bergsoniana.1185>



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JAN PATOČKA, BERGSON'S CAREFUL READER?

Débora Morato Pinto

The originality of Jan Patočka's work stands out in the multi-faceted field of phenomenology. It can be described as innovative, particularly when faced with the methodological approach that requires that philosophical reflection remain within the limits established by the correlational a priori. The impact of that originality can be clearly seen in Renaud Barbaras' works on so-called "asubjective" phenomenology.¹ This reflection on desire, life, and cosmology by one of the main contemporary French thinkers enables us to reassess the diffuse and even almost concealed presence of another major philosophical project, Bergson's metaphysics of time. Once again, it should be pointed out how Bergsonism drives the vigorousness of French phenomenology as the silent background for the French 20th century.² From this background, important critiques emerged about which both Patočka and Barbaras adopt ambiguous positions. They follow Bergsonian directions or tendencies of thought, but then find, at the point of divergence, in a "dead end" or at a crossroads, their own paths and their own philosophical deployments. In fact, the attempt to exceed Husserlian subjectivity (still very much a prisoner of Cartesian modern subjectivity) can be seen as the characteristic trait of the critical reception of

1. Renaud Barbaras devoted several texts to Patočka's philosophy. See in particular Barbaras (2011).

2. In this respect, Patočka can be added to the set of readings that make the silent background of contemporary French philosophy, or Bergson's thinking underlying the French reception of Husserl, Heidegger, Hegel and Marx, speak — even though the tendency was always "to conceal the traces left by Bergson's philosophy on French thinking from the post-war period to the 1970s" (Chauvi 1989).

Husserl's work in France. A critical reading of Husserl's intuitionism leads us to the "Barbaras-Patočka" pairing, the most sophisticated approach to overcoming it. Thus, we can find major philosophical lessons if we consider this association, which includes within its movement and context many fragmentary texts by Patočka that resist the formation of a theoretical system. More explicitly, the philosophical cohesiveness originated by this connection between both phenomenologists³ can teach us much about processuality, the original feeling of life, the drive or force that, due to its own effectivity, reveals the beings or shows their manifestation, against the originating background of experience and thus of correlation, among other key notions. By trying to understand and assimilate these lessons, we can understand how Bergsonism operates as a sort of welding seam between the phenomenological-metaphysical investigation into distance, movement (and motricity) and the ontological phenomenology of desire and life.

Bergson's presence in this philosophical picture, is often suggested by Renaud Barbaras, like in his beautiful preface to the *Carnets Philosophiques*, as well as in various other works, despite Patočka's critique of Bergson's metaphysics of movement. Two examples can be given here. If some of the limits of phenomenology lie in the abstract conception of the subject, the way to overcome them can be found in the moving level described as "the *originating* life from which the multiplicity of entities comes" (Barbaras in Patočka 2021, 22, my emphasis). Life as a totality of moving tendencies, we could almost say, following *Creative Evolution*, a dynamic proper to a Being that is no longer conceived of as eternity and immobility comes into play.

Likewise, in order to account for the relationship between life and world — an unavoidable step towards handling the concept of world — phenomenologists have to deal with meaning, moving the doctrine of meaning away from an ideal conception of being. The first pages of the *Carnets* state the problem and focus on one of its variables: if the empiricist notion of sensation is inevitably intertwined with the reification that is characteristic of the objectivist malady, the critique of its spatial

3. The current and welcome publication of the *Carnets Philosophiques* makes that heritage explicit again, as the beautiful preface by Barbaras highlights one of the main lessons learnt: phenomenological investigation must reach the background that underlies subjectivity, a condition that evidences the inadequacy of reducing it to consciousness. See Patočka (2021), in a collection of essays that cover a wide range of philosophical issues and topics.

framing — a specific sensation is a part that is added to other parts — offers the way to overcome it. Patočka goes straight to the point when he reflects on the meaning of the world through his critique of Bergson's intensity, reaching the question of intensity as a "whole structure that is almost quantitative in nature" (Patočka 2021, 50): a Bergsonian motif in the rejection of the intellectual-quantitative conception of sensation, later rejected as insufficient — in a critique that, moreover, scorns the depth of the basic notion in *Time and Free Will*. Intensity, and, concomitantly, sensation, freed from the spatial *a priori*, surely entail a new relationship between quality and quantity.⁴ What is important here is that, both separately and through Barbaras' joint construction with Patočka, we can see the operation of the notion of interiority as the very condition for expressivity and correlation, which is presented as a movement or process — the continuous transformation that is temporality.⁵

In any case, in the various reflections, heterogeneously expressed in the *Carnets* we find a mixture of Heidegger's influence — texts which speak Heidegger's language even when they distance themselves from an ontology where the main operating factor is angst — and powerful incursions into Bergson's ideas. The main ones include the inclination towards dynamic positivity (an essential gesture to deviate from the predominance of nothingness and the void) has an impact on expressivity, a phenomenological topic, now understood as a process or the dynamic effectiveness of an interiority that, when expressed, proves to be spatial. Thus, there are many reflections by Patočka in which the *ontology of movement*, the light by which the life of the world is revealed as the source of one's own subjectivity, appears to complete the insight regarding duration, as it explores a different side of time, its ineluctable exteriorization in space. I am underlining here something that could be read as the incessant productive confrontation between Bergsonism and the philosophy of the movement of life, a significant part of what Barbaras sought in Patočka.

This means that the involvement between the processual background (the real condition of possibility for correlation) and the very dynamics of manifestation places us on the tracks of the philosophy of perception developed at the turn of the century by Bergson — that is, the echoes of

4. The theory of multiplicities in the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* and the extensive nature of sensation described in *Matter and Memory* are the data that make Patočka's judgement questionable.

5. As Barbaras makes explicit: "His thinking on interiority is infused with Bergsonism, placing expression, conceived as a process, at its centre" Barbaras (in Patočka 2021, 22).

Matter and Memory. Indeed, conceiving of perception as an action in the world resulted, throughout the reformulation of the problem of dualism, in the argument that the embodied subjectivity, a living body that stands out in a field of related images, *acts and cuts out the world to the exact extent in which it perceives it*. Perception is in the thing, in the world, as the exteriorization of a singular life that incessantly creates itself: my body, the limit (tip) of the history that I am, is there to the same extent as all images, the totality of other images, “as there is no material object that does not owe its qualities, its determinations, ultimately its existence to the place that it holds in the university. Thus, my perception can only be of these objects in themselves; it is in them” (Bergson 2012, 257).⁶ Bergson’s theory of perception exerted a strong influence on French phenomenology. In this context, the central thesis that a sensible world is an “expressive phenomenon” arises in accordance with a conception of interiority that is no longer closed on itself or defined like substantiality, but rather in which the moments-parts are dynamically involved with each other, staging an open totality, in constant succession and interpenetration. Interiority as an expressive totalization of mutually involved moments.

It is thus significant that, from the start of his own reflections on this matter, Patočka reconceived expression as intrinsically connected to the body, overcoming the basis of discursivity and signification through a concrete dynamic in which the sensible entails an interiority that can ultimately be defined as *life*. Otherwise put, even the power of poetic language arises from the fact that the sensible world is “at its origin, an expressive phenomenon, because in it all things are animated by a singular, hidden life, because it contains no death” (Patočka 2021, 79). The identification of interiority, being, and existence is the result of a deep reflection on the life of the world, or of the originating world, which is before and beyond correlation, understood as what it is — a positivity underlying a negativity which is now limited to individuation, a life or dynamicity that propels subjectivity and even restricts it.

We thus find that, beyond the difference between life and death, positivity and nothingness, Bergson’s struggle with dualism can be found throughout Patočka’s work and starts to emerge in the 1940s, including in the initial

6. As the passage continues, the kinship of all reality with consciousness, that is, the delineation of a notion of the world no longer as exteriorised objectivity separate from the subject, comes into play: “It is thus that perceiving consists in detaching, from the whole of the objects, *the possible action of my body* on them. Perception is then only a selection” (Bergson 2012, 257).

text of *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*, up to the key work that is the *Papiers Phénoménologiques*.⁷ This presence is strongly active in the two interconnected sides of that inventive philosophy: firstly, the convergences of the problems faced with the *ontology* that highlights the qualitative unity of movement, and, secondly, the *phenomenology* of expression, which is removed to the field of the investigation of the living body and the intertwining of perception and motricity. Indeed, considering that there is a unity inherent to movement — of a clearly ontological, if not metaphysical nature — understood again as a realization or concrete act open the way for the new conception of the world that significantly reshapes the correlational a priori. There is no predominance, in the polarized connection between the subject for whom the world is made manifest — the “phenomenalizing subjectivity” — and that very world, of the signification relation whose field of analysis is the dialecticalized discursivity of tradition, which is closed on itself and can be determined through logical-conceptual analysis. Otherwise put, the world, as an appearing instance, whose establishment involves at the same time its manifestation, inseparably from its transcendence, can only be made evident as a concrete ground of experience through the unpolluted (or, in Bergson's terms, purified) description of the *living body whose effectivity entails its expressivity*. This is the obvious consequence that can be already drawn from the *Carnets*, which is the object of further in-depth examination in the *Papiers*: the concrete nature of a phenomenology of movement owes more than it seems to the metaphysics of time that is the basis for the discovery of the qualitative movement that underlies understanding movement as dislocation in space.

From the beginning to the end of his work, we find in Patočka the tension between the philosophy of consciousness based on Husserl and the conception of the body as movement, which is the path towards finding the essential dynamicity. Consistently with Barbaras' reading, the goal becomes to undertake a new description of the world as the true transcendental, no longer conceived of as the totality of related things, but as processuality itself. The topics of phenomenology — such as the return to experience before and beyond the objectivist point of view — are

7. It is not possible for me to delve deeper here into Patočka's close engagement with Bergson's philosophy throughout his entire oeuvre. I will only mention that this engagement takes on particularly critical tones with regard to the themes of negativity and nothingness in the second half of the 1940s, in Patočka's essay “Nothingness, Absolute Position and Negation,” as has been discussed in detail by Čapek (2021).

subject here to a number of influences affecting the attempt to retrieve the (perceptible) value of the *original feeling of life*. Thus, the return to the non-reified lived experience requires combating the philosophical acquisitions sedimented in knowledge, particularly the “objectivist malady” that subjects our lived experience to the essentials of a natural world conceived of following the guidelines of modern science. The return to the concrete has a specific Bergsonian aspect here: it should be borne in mind that, in basing his investigation on in-depth experience, also become a method that articulates emotion and knowledge, Bergson anticipated the philosophy of body and of emotion, of perception and of life, without the constraints of the correlational a priori — the methodological principle established by Husserl on the basis of the knowledge of model provided by logico-rational processes. Or to be more specific, signification processes.

The coming into play of the subjective movement, through the crucial concept of *force voyante*, was previously prepared by a thorough critical work based on the notion that the idea of the world buried the original feeling of life on which that idea was itself built. Thus, recovering lived experience is identified as a conquest that overcomes the conflict between the naïve world and the world of science, the conceived world that in some way deviates from a singular experience whose lessons should constitute the basis for philosophical reflection. The objectivist malady that takes the idea of the world as the source or origin of reflection ultimately “violates our original feeling of life.” Recovering it is the way to overcome the knot of problems arising from the distance between the natural world, naïve experience, and scientific conception. Philosophical modernity is, in this respect, an acute version of objectivism: following the dogmatism inherent to its entire philosophical reflection, it establishes a connection between fixed, substantialized subjectivity and mathematical objectivity, losing sight of deep subjectivity. However, the attempt to find again the subjective background against which synthesis takes place in experience, and thus the idea of the world is effectively conceived of, has marked phenomenology since Husserl, but found a special and original stage in French thought. It is within that change of perspective that Patočka’s ideas should be understood, as well as the weight, conscious or not, of Bergson’s philosophy. Like some of his contemporaries like Whitehead, Bergson powerfully attempted a synthesis of the world of consciousness and of science, precisely because he had understood that solving the problem of the contradiction between them required plunging into deep subjectivity.

Purely for illustrative purposes, let us consider the basic notion of subjective movement, precisely that which essentially characterizes the embodied subjectivity, that is, the living body. The *Papiers Phénoménologiques* focus on it, and try to explore a level that underlies correlation as a locus proper to a movement that involves a subject living in its possibilities and a world in which something is in accordance with that project. The importance of this statement to ascertain how the connection between Heidegger and Bergson takes the specific form of Patočka's phenomenology could not be any clearer. The subjectivity that determines itself and thus constitutes a self-relation is that which modifies itself, which requires motricity — a paralyzed subject, incapable of any effective motor action, is dream-like, not real. If we think about the effective conditions for self-creation, the very definition of existence, we are led to the heart of *Matter and Memory*, in which the body goes from being a special image in the way in which movement is returned to the world to the last memory of a history under incessant construction — a life. Everything is at play, in both philosophies of perception, in the way in which the movement of existence, is defined and described, and is revealed to originally be an action of the living body in the special way in which it moves. Thus, if for Patočka our existence is embodied, this is identified with the fact that “our own body, as a living body, a body capable of moving and over which we have power, is the basis of all life of experience.” The unity of movement that is at the same time realization and virtualization, configures the subject, who is in essence a power over the body, the comprehension of its possibility, and only because of this the life of experience:

For this reason, it should also be said: our existence is such that not only does movement essentially belong to it, but such that it is, by its entire nature, movement (Patočka 1995, 107, my emphasis).

Existence is bodily and its difference with respect to other beings lies in the *quality involved in its movement*. Thus, we are led to movement taken up before its characterization as dislocation in space, finding its pre-objectivity by losing its identification with spatial trajectory, in the *segment* of space crossed. Movement is no longer what “has already been done,” crossed, delimited, but the doing itself, the real condition for possibility of a life, something that exists. For this reason Patočka can say that it constitutes our entire nature. In a subjective phenomenology, the goal is to grasp or create a concept of movement that accounts for the life of experience, which is, first of all, different from the restricted movement

conceived of in the field of modern science, an “essentially quantitative mathematical structure.” To state this again: it *is* in different mode from that of spatial dislocation. Accepting Aristotle’s heritage, phenomenologists present the idea of movement as a possibility that is realized, delineating vectorized moments inherent to the *whole* that is movement. If the issue is to cleanse the Aristotelian concept from its dogmatic impurity — the mobile that underlies, the unmoving substrate, substance — it is obvious that the thinking that is suggested there is the qualitative movement that can be understood through duration. The proximity of duration, change, and movement closely follows the philosophy of the body, the point of convergence for Patočka and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception.

To summarize, the texts from the 1940s bear witness to, and deepen, the reflections that focus on the originating nature of movement in Patočka’s philosophy, anticipating his better known and original ideas. Such is the case of the “force voyante” by which subjectivity is ultimately defined, as well as the link between motricity and corporeity — the concrete expression of the life of the world that underlines correlation. These theses are precisely those that place Patočka’s phenomenology halfway between German and French phenomenology — or, otherwise put, between the Husserl/Heidegger pairing and Merleau-Ponty’s project. The new comprehension of movement as qualitative supports the interpretation of the living body, the specific topic discussed in the *Papiers*: taking our own body *qua* living body as the basis of all the life of experience, that is, a body that can moved in a way that is not limited to dislocation in space (Patočka 1995, 107). In other words, asubjective phenomenology must show the real and concrete condition of subjects, or of subjectivity, inverting the direction that seeks to find in the subject as the condition for the possibility of manifestation and expression — that is, sense givenness. This condition is the movement associated with life, which is made concrete in corporeity.

It is also important to highlight here the “more global,” so to speak, context of the indeterminate influence on Patočka’s of his initial reading of Bergson’s texts. Beyond the topics of movement, corporeity, and perception connected to a force that is able to see, lies the entire question of dualism which appears here. Indeed, the first lines of the interesting initial chapter of the *Papiers*, entitled “Phenomenology and the metaphysics of movement,” announce the task proposed: to evidence the fact that overcoming the fixed positions of the modern philosophical tradition — materialism and

spiritualism, dualism and monism — stabilized in two poles separated by an uncrossable gap, relies on the mobilization of such phenomena as “subjective corporeity and its inherent movement.” Considering phenomena without framing them within these categories avoids the dogmatism of the various responses to the Cartesian problem *par excellence*, “the self-certainty of the reflecting mind.” But to do this, the limits of discursive reflection must be crossed, finding the body again as embodied existence, taking our own living body as the basis of all experience. If phenomenology is to be consistent, it must face the challenge of Cartesian substantialism, which has impacted Western thought at least until the start of the 20th century. Even though Descartes’ central insight is to be preserved in the assertion of a self-posing existence, the fact is that the duality between body and soul is the generalized dogma of the ensuing metaphysics, extending itself as a thesis unwittingly accepted by 19th-century scientists. The question for Patočka is that this dualism imprisoned the idea of man in the mutually isolated poles of self-enclosed self-consciousness and the body objectivized as part of space. The challenge is also acknowledged by a significant part of the phenomenologists, but the radical progress here lies in the fact that the Cartesian self-certainty is a sort of rite of passage, without which the effective body with the motricity that makes it properly subjective cannot be found.

Consequently, asubjective phenomenology seeks to free human beings from their dualistic bonds, from the subjectivity conceived of as a mind that constitutes the objects in the world and can then understand and explore the new idea of man as the power of self-movement and self-understanding as subjective movement and seeing force. Patočka’s “ultimate” concern is man, and the ethical implications of considering human beings from a phenomenological point of view. However, the way to accept and advance Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is by understanding subjective movement as realization and virtualization, “a movement that never happens without comprehension,” and which, being comprehensive, projects possibilities, that is, an “internally rich, enriched movement.” That is the point here: the connection between concrete self-realization and the projection of virtualities only becomes visible following Bergson’s critique of the concept of movement. To summarize, the assertion of the qualitative (temporary) nature of movement brings mind and matter closer to each other, and Bergson’s attenuated dualism derives from this twist in the way in which movement is seen, extending to his careful readers, such as Patočka.

The Bergsonian roots of this daring phenomenology find, in the texts translated and published here in *Bergsoniana*, a certain gaze that captures the essential trends of the philosophy of duration. It is significant that Patočka wrote a review of Jankélévitch's book: it is an interpretation that attempts to attain the spirit of that philosophy. That is why he sees Bergson as the *doorway to contemporary philosophy*, which opens the middle way between Descartes' "direct and systematic" rationalism and the link in the mystical chain that is Pascal. In this way, the approach between the organic, the spiritual, and the depths and the mystical tradition that attracts the Patočka's attention can be understood. Spirituality beyond rationality is at play in the considerations he makes in the review of the book and in his preface to *Two Sources*. Otherwise put, the place of the silent background to contemporary French philosophy that Patočka apparently recognized in Bergson is due to his ability to give a philosophical answer to Descartes, thus leaving a legacy of a new idea of man. The point is to understand how the new vision of Western man arises from the non-oppositional difference between the vital and the rational, between deep and shallow — the soul or consciousness is identified with the nuances between openness to the world as spatialization and the temporal depth that is irreducible to space. These limits, moreover, are never taken as concrete beings. Or, to use Patočka's own terms, the point is not to oppose immaterial subjectivity and spatial objectivity, or even to establish a gap between life and reason, but to overcome oppositions by finding the degrees of temporality or duration and how they comprise the very origin of reason from the open and dynamic totality that exceeds it.

By thus commenting on the spirit of Bergsonism, Patočka shows the weight of the meditation on time in French phenomenology — the phenomenology that will take the body and movement as the nuclei of concrete experience and the reasons for the unfolding of life not reflected in rationally instituted objectivity. The difference between the levels of the real is not delexicalized, turning them into mutually incompatible poles: underlying all oppositions, however unbridgeable they may seem, flows the continuity of creating life, which beats even in its most weakened form, beneath the field of the "geometric regularities in matter." By digging under the flat, orderly world, we can find properly human intensity in the freedom of the spirit as a creating force. In the much more precise synthetic texts that the reader will find here, we find Patočka's ingenious, careful reading of Bergsonism, identifying in it a renewed, peculiar humanism that

connects it with the classics *whose tones can be heard*⁸ in that thinking. A nuanced humanism, which connects with the origins of philosophy and its ideals, relies however on a radical critique of the obstacles that undermine contact with a comprehension of the essentially dynamic nature of the real. By forgetting time, we lost sight of the very spirituality that defines us. Ultimately, Patočka's emphasis on Bergson's contributions towards outlining a new characterization of the human is striking in its precision. Apprehending spirituality as various degrees of effectivization arises from an insight into duration and leads to an idea directly connected to the problem of dualism, the incommensurability of mind and brain. Only by understanding this idea can we really understand the "inexhaustible wealth of the spiritual horizon" which is made manifest in our experience. This is one of the main lessons of Bergson's innovative and peculiar spiritualism, removed from the vulgar, precisely because it comprises the differences in tension between the durations of matter, spirit, and their intertwining in a being whose experience converges towards freedom. From psychology to epistemology, from ontology to ethics, the Bergsonian source projects onto asubjective phenomenology the reconsideration of man and his history in light of duration, that is, of the creative dynamicity of the real.

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8. The mention of the classic tones is striking in the preface to *Two Sources*. See the passage: "Through Bergson's work, a sort of reminiscence of classic tones, which we are almost used not to hear, entered today's sombre philosophical symphony."

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<https://doi.org/10.4000/bergsoniana.1185>