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Introduction

1 In my paper, I will ask how the primacy of practical over theoretical understanding in Jan Patočka’s philosophy transforms the traditional approach to the problem of phenomena. Not only Jan Patočka endorses Heidegger’s claim that things appear first and foremost as correlates of our concerns and practical involvements, but he invites us to reformulate the Husserlian question of appearing as such in terms of motion. Insofar as we accomplish the movement of our existence within the world – understood as an open field of possibilities –, its features unfold primarily as solicitations to actions. The primacy of practice and its link to the way the things manifest themselves is explicitly announced by Patočka in the following passage:

If the first encounter of “things” is possible in principle only in the form of handling pragmata, it would seem inevitable that the problem of the phenomenon, the problem of appearing, will be profoundly affected by this fact. It is not the practical that should be understood on the basis of intuited presentations but, on the contrary, the attitude of disinterested contemplation whose genesis we should attempt to understand on the basis of the interested and engaged understanding proper to human being in its finite life. (Patočka 2016b: 190)

2 Against Husserl’s appeal to the primacy of intuitive evidences, Patočka argues that our practical concern with things constitute a necessary background for understanding how it
is possible for us to judge, to state, or to represent *how things are*. In other words, our cognitive capacities (judgment, intuition, representation and other propositional attitudes) are embedded in the competent performance of practical tasks. As we know from *Sein und Zeit*, such performances carry their own kind of understanding or sight, called “circumspection” [*Umsicht*] by Heidegger, which grasps things in light of the work to be done, in the light of the project with which we identify ourselves. Patočka extends such analysis further and claims that the manifestation of all beings is correlative to the self-movement performed by the living being that each of us is. Replaced in this existential context, the primacy of practice implies, first, that human beings encounter things as correlates of their practical possibilities and not as objective correlates of their inner representations. Second, emphasizing the primacy of practice reveals the fundamental dependence of all sense-making on both our bodily belonging to the world and the shared sphere of norms that are not of our own making. Such a pragmatic turn in phenomenology will therefore entail abandoning several of Husserl’s presuppositions according to which the meaning of phenomena is fundamentally constituted by the consciousness of transcendental subjectivity.

Husserl defines in the *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* the central task of phenomenology as the elaboration of “the universal a priori” between the transcendent being and its subjective modes of givenness, i.e. between aspects of the world and acts of consciousness. Drawing on Husserl’s redefinition of the world as “world of praxis,” Patočka encourages us to situate such a universal correlation between fundamental movements of our existence and the articulation of the world that we experience while acting upon it. In other words, if our primordial encounter with things reveals them as pragmata, we should reformulate the problem of world-disclosure in terms of correlation between different modalities of praxis and various ways in which we make sense of things, other human beings and ourselves. This is what I will call pragmatic disclosure.

For such purpose, I have decided to take Patočka’s phenomenology as the starting point to reveal some pragmatic elements within existential phenomenology, rather than Heidegger’s ontology, that was largely interpreted through a pragmatist key.¹ Pace Dreyfus and Okrent, it is far from certain that Heidegger proposes, in his analysis of everyday dealing with the Umwelt, a positive theory supposed to explain the sources of intelligibility.² Unlike Heidegger, Patočka does not hesitate to endorse explicitly the primacy of practice thesis and to extend Heideggerian analysis of circumspective concern into a more nuanced, yet more inclusive account of our practical engagement in the world. In the following study, I contend that such extension offers the possibility of a more coherent phenomenological encounter with pragmatism that enables us to appreciate both the common ground and several differences between existential phenomenology and pragmatist philosophy. The common denominators consist mostly of the following claims: the basic sources of sense-making are practical rather than theoretical and they are to be found in mutually co-determined practices rather than in the individual consciousness. At the same time, Patočka would criticize the contemporary analytical pragmatism for neglecting two issues that he considers essential for clarifying the primacy of practice: the embodied nature of our worldly and intersubjective dealings and the question of what gives different practices their unity. To summarize, if analytical pragmatism emphasizes linguistic practices as sources of all
intelligibility, a pragmatically oriented phenomenology focuses on the role of embodied transactions with each other and with our shared environment.

1. Pragmatic Disclosure of Lifeworld

The problem of the lifeworld is to be tackled from the perspective of different disclosive activities that we perform, while the problem of appearing is to be linked to different normative standards guiding these activities. According to Patočka, the problem of the natural world [lifeworld] thus shows itself to be that of the primordiality of this practical engagement, inseparable from a nonexplicit, nonthematic understanding of being which Husserl would have termed instinctive. (Patočka 2016b: 190)

It is possible to find in these lines Patočka’s usual strategy of treating Husserlian problems with Heideggerian conceptual tools. The Husserlian notion of lifeworld should not be identified with “realm of original self-evidences” (Husserl 1970: 127), but should be conceived as an existential horizon that is always already articulated by our practical behavior, which is, in turn, imbued with a certain affective tonality pertaining to our situatedness. Patočka himself doesn’t refer this primary affective understanding to the presence of natural urges or drives within the human organism, but he preserves the idea in his own way, as being part of the instinctive-affective movement of existence. As we will see in a while, such a redefinition has far-reaching consequences: affective attunement to the world is not something we merely have; our affective bonds to the (social) world are not simply there, but must be woven and fostered. The primacy of practice means in this context that the lifeworld is firstly disclosed by our practico-affective involvement with a meaningful world-configuration in which persons and things matter to us. Such involvement is further articulated by Patočka in terms of three movements of human existence, namely the movement of sinking roots within a familiar world, the one of self-extension through work and competition and the one of self-questioning for the sake of truth. My goal is to interpret all three movements of human existence as three different forms of praxis and to demonstrate how each of them deploys its own way of making things intelligible.

For those familiar with Patočka’s phenomenology, an objection comes to mind: the pragmatic disclosure is merely the function of the second movement, called the “movement of self-extension” (Patočka 2016a: 171) or alternatively “the movement of defense” (Patočka 1996c: 29). Only in accomplishing this movement “carried out in the region of human work” (Patočka 1998: 148) do things appear as equipment, the world as the standing-reserve of energies to be exploited, and other human beings as instruments or obstacles to my ends. In Patočka’s words, this movement sees things purely in their utensility and not in their independence. In this movement, we understand ourselves as providers, endowed with skill and know-how, dealing with tasks, entrusted with a function and a “role”; these possibilities, directly realized as such, then throw light on the provided, on the pragmata. (Patočka 2016a: 171)

One could argue, then, that pragmatic disclosure is limited to the second movement that tends to see both persons and things as use values. In order to dispel such an objection, I will try to demonstrate that the first and third movements, too, are to be conceived as modalities of praxis with their own way of articulating our lifeworld.
It might seem far-stretched to call pragmatic the first movement, usually called the “movement of acceptance” (Patočka 1996: 29), “sinking roots” (Patočka 1998: 148) or “anchoring” (Patočka 2016a: 165). This first movement takes its start in the incompleteness of physical individuation, in the inability of the newborn to provide for itself. This biological neoteny must be compensated by a community (and first of all by the close ones) which is there to transform the originary thrownness [Geworfenheit] in the acceptance of a fundamentally non-autonomous being. Notwithstanding its mostly affective character, it also deploys an appropriate form of praxis, which is typically conservative, aiming at preserving our belonging to tradition as something valuable. On a level of private sphere, not only children education, but also practices related to the sphere of tenderness are disclosing the world and our partners according to certain emotional tones which are to be preserved, maintained and developed. This joint movement thus manifests ourselves and others as mutually caring beings, each responding to the passivity of the other with an activity that brings out the closeness of the I-Thou relationships. It is through endorsing our practical identities as parents, partners and friends that we transform the natural precarity of the natural world into a “warm and kindly hearth” (Patočka 1996c: 30).

Such proximity is not to be instituted and maintained solely at the level of family relations. In the public sphere, conservative praxis discloses the world as stemming from the past, which is to be preserved in its certainties and traditional values to which our community is attached. Namely, various rituals, commemorations and routines must be accomplished and considerable effort must be deployed to maintain the world as something that can be taken for granted, as the familiar milieu of our tacit mutual understanding. In this way, the affective dimension of the first movement blends into one with the practical aspect of the familiar world. The first movement already contains practical elements organized around its purpose, which is to transform the world from the cold and insecure place in which we are thrown to a hospitable space of human proximity. Its ultimate goal, in other words, is to redeem our uncertainty and anxiety about our “perennially precarious life” (Patočka 1996c: 24). To transform the disquieting strangeness of the world into an articulated Lebenswelt with delimited boundaries amounts to outlining the contours of what is proper to the form of life shared by our community and thus to draw, within the world, the distinction between the familiar and the foreign. In contrast to Heidegger’s identification of the public sphere with the dictatorship of das Man, Patočka’s account of the first movement more accurately qualifies the emergence of shared background practices and norms within communal forms of life. Although the tendency to conform one’s own thinking and acting to communal patterns is certainly a threat to both Heidegger and Patočka, only the latter is able to clearly tell the difference between the constitutive conformity thanks to which there is a shared world and the evils of conformism understood as the leveling-down of the innermost possibilities of Dasein. Patočka is also more careful to give an accurate description of how one enters the already articulated lifeworld, while being expected to embrace its fundamental distinctions.

We should thus conclude that through the movement of sinking roots, our passive affective attunement has to be actively endorsed. We do not merely have determined biological urges, drives and instincts, as if they were occurrent entities within our bodies. What matters is how we use them in our caring and soliciting interactions with others and how we engage in joint sense-making of our current situation, while relying
on the strength of past and the reliability of accustomed responses. Even if the world appears through the lens of this first movement as given, as an already-made place of reliable certainties, it can only emerge as such in the context of various routines that we perform in order to maintain it the way it already is. We exist as immersed in a world that manifests its own cohesion and its inner divisions, such as the oppositions between private and public, or familiar and foreign, in a way that precedes any explicit or thematic understanding. To be sure, there is a risk in taking such divisions for granted, for the movement of acceptance involves, among other things, uncritically accepting the practices that serve to perpetuate “our” form of life, even if this may be at the expense of those excluded from it.

Now, where does this leave the third movement, which from Patočka’s perspective represents the possibility of redemption from the limitations that characterize both previous movements? At first sight, the third movement might seem even further from the pragmatic dimension than the first one: its regulative ideal consists in thinking freely, in distancing oneself not only from given meanings, but also from all kinds of practical aims and tasks accomplished mostly through the second movement. However, even the third movement deploys its own kind of praxis, whether we conceive it as an attempt to understand things in what they truly are, in philosophy or science, or as a never-ending striving for justice in political action (which are the three most often cited instances in Patočka’s work).

Within the realm of politics, pragmata in large sense are to be understood as concerns to be collectively assessed and discussed. The difficulty is that most pragmatist perspectives in phenomenology tend to confuse the notion of pragmata with mere tools. Such readings thus miss the richer understanding of pragmata that is provided, for example, by Klaus Held. As Held shows, the Greek concept of pragmata does not refer merely to equipment, but to “possibilities for action that we take into consideration in conversation with others or in consulting ourselves, in order to reach any given aim” (Held 2002: 65). Held’s extension of the concept of pragmata invites us to consider the things as we encounter them first and foremost not only as equipment, but rather as things that matter to our shared concerns, as possibilities for collective action, as affordances open in the public sphere. The political model provides a helpful guiding principle to grasp the open-ended and indeterminate nature of pragmata, once we understand them as common affairs, problems or stakes, whose nature is inseparable from the debates and the multiplicity of perspectives that give rise to them. Where Patočka identify things with pragmata, John Dewey speaks of “concerns” or common issues that are determined through public debate: “I use ‘things’ in the broadest sense, as equaling res, and covering affairs, concerns, acts.” (Dewey 2004: 221).

Furthermore, politics is conceived both by Arendt and Patočka as free initiative whose telos resides in making the public sphere a place where each person can manifest her own ipseity. Patočka defines the auto-teleological structure of political action in reference to the emergence of the polis whose citizens

[...] begin to live in order to conquer, for themselves and those who share their will, the space for their recognition, the space for freedom. That is politics in its original definition: life from freedom and for freedom. (Patočka 1981: 1)

Such freedom, however, is not realized in a void, but must be put into practice through the polemical quest for consensus concerning the concrete material conditions under which we are to live together. In this political dealings with matters of public interest,
Pragmata in the above-mentioned broad sense emerge by and through the intersection of perspectives adopted within the open-ended debate. As such, they belong to a world where my possibilities to act are always entangled both harmoniously and polemically with the possibilities to act of my fellow citizens. The fundamental activity proper to politics, then, is to enter into debate about the concerns and goals that bind the community of citizens, while granting each other the freedom to co-determine the conditions of our common existence. Against all attempts to reduce politics to an instrumental manipulation of things according to some pre-established and supra-political ends, be they economic or social, Patočka joins Hannah Arendt in asserting that political praxis has its finality in itself. The telos of such a practice is to create and perpetuate the realm where each of us is able to realize his or her freedom, where every shared meaning can be contested and where polemos is the only principle of unity.

When it comes to the field of science and its capacity to reveal things in a theoretical attitude, phenomenology meets pragmatism, which presents scientific achievements not as the results of a disinterested contemplation, but rather as a “continuation of practice by other means” (Rorty 1991: 31). To identify science with an attitude of disengaged wonder would misconstrue the phenomenology of scientific theorizing, as Joseph Rouse’s practice-based account of science shows. From Rouse’s perspective, theories are analogues to maps, diagrams, laboratory experiments and other equipment which enable scientists to engage with the natural world. Even the scientific breakthroughs involve a situated attentiveness to those aspects of one’s situation that are significant for working out of possibilities both within the “world” of theories and of the world mapped by these theories. Scientific revolutions themselves must be understood as practical remedies to situations where things resist our best efforts to understand them. Understanding the theoretical endeavors of science as belonging to the third movement of existence, moreover, allows us to redefine the rationality inherent in the scientific investigation of nature in terms that take into account its historical and social contingency: the rationality of knowledge is characterized neither by the unquestionability of its foundations nor by the irrevocability of its results, but on the contrary by the systematic revision and questioning of any of its candidates for truth. Such an observation further brings an existentially oriented phenomenology closer to the pragmatic and anti-foundationalist conception of science found especially in Sellars: “[s]cience is rational, not because it has a foundation but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once.” (Sellars 1997: 79).

Finally, philosophical inquiry stems for Patočka from the conflicts that emerge on the very level of life, be it its precariousness and vulnerability, or a certain reification resulting from our absorption in our professional and administrative roles. If philosophy is to provide an answer to such conflicts or frustrations, it can never reside in a pure reflection on the contents of consciousness. At the same time, Patočka appreciates positively Husserl’s definition of self-responsibility as the commitment to shape one’s life according to the rule of reason. The rationality of the third movement, in its effort to find truth by questioning all inherited meanings, is thus directly connected with the ethical obligation to testify for one’s opinions, to expose oneself to possible criticism and to endorse one’s responsibility for the norms according to which one judges, acts and thinks. That’s why Patočka identifies the third movement of
existence with a certain transformative modality of praxis rather than with a
disengaged reflection:
I can modify this bondage to the particular and transform my own relationship to
the universe. This transformation goes hand in hand with a transformation of what
binds me to my own life; it is not mere insight, pure reflection or contemplation,
though these are all assuredly present as stages on the way; here, too, living in a
possibility means grasping and realizing this possibility, it is a mode of praxis.
(Patočka 2016a: 175)

18 Even philosophical reflection is thus not only theoretical, but it is part of our practical
insertion within the concerns of lifeworld and it bears its own consequences for ethical
and political matters. The transformation emphasized by Patočka in the
abovementioned quote requires not only to question our theoretical stances and
prejudices, but also to modify one's own interests. Here resides Patočka's original
reappropriation of Husserl's claim in the Crisis: if grounding of all truths, be there
scientific or philosophical, “leads back” to everyday, practical and situational truths, 7
then we have to acknowledge that all our intellectual accomplishments are embedded
in the practical context of their genesis and that they are meaningful, through their
practical implications, as guiding rules of our further acting. Following Husserl,
Patočka refuses to reduce the pursuit of truth to knowledge of objective facts, and
encourages us to redefine our best efforts to seek the truth in terms of freely
undertaken commitment to problematize all things taken for granted.

19 Already in his manuscript from 1950s Supercivilization and its Inner Conflict, Patočka
criticizes the tendency to reduce the meaning of truth to objective knowledge of facts.
He advocates the necessity of redefining the value of living that entails admitting that
“the truth is not a simple ‘theoretical question,’ to be solved thanks to ‘objective
methods,’ using means always available under the species of such or such institutions
and persons specially gifted for that” (Patočka 1996a: 289). In his polemics against the
positivist conception of truth as measurable and neutral knowledge, Patočka suggests
that the pursuit of truth concerns the very way in which we are present to the world. 8
In the same vein, Patočka emphasizes in his latest essays about Plato and Europe that the
task of thinking is not to be reduced to what could be demonstrated and impartially
justified and that even Plato’s philosophy, centered around the care for the soul cannot
be merely “proven through any kind of external demonstration, but rather is the praxis
of this soul bringing itself into motion” (Patočka 2002: 188-9). In the end, philosophy
amounts to practicing a way of life in which one is able to take responsibility not only
for one’s own assertions, but also for one’s unchosen and inherited situation, insofar as
the latter is never independent of one’s attitude towards it. “The adversity of the times
and the current situation is not of our own making, we inherited it. Yet we are
responsible for it,” 9 writes Patočka in his reflection inspired by William Faulkner’s Wild
Palms. The person herself and her inclusion in the world as a whole is thus put into
question.

20 The following passage from the Crisis reveals how Husserl’s notion of “desinterested
spectator” differs from Patočka’s conception of philosophy and its basic orientation
and finality. In the theoretical attitude, says Husserl in his Vienna lecture,

[m]an becomes gripped by the passion of a world-view and world-knowledge
[Weltbetrachtung und Welterkenntnis] that turns away from all practical interests and
within the closed sphere of its cognitive activity, in the times devoted to it, strives
for and achieves nothing but pure theoria. In other words, man becomes a

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nonparticipating spectator, surveyor of the world; he becomes a philosopher.
(Husserl 1970: 285)

Where Husserl emphasizes detachment from all practical finalities, Patočka conceives of philosophy not as a matter of detachment or disinterest, but rather as an intensification of interest in being. For Patočka, the responsibility is focused on what form of life we choose, it is a “responsibility for what we have been so far and what we intend to become” (Patočka 2016a: 121).

2. Holistic Pragmatism of Existential Phenomenology

So far, we demonstrated that it is possible to reinterpret Patočka’s approach to phenomena in terms of pragmatic disclosure, if we do not understand by such term merely instrumental disclosure, but rather the umbrella term for understanding how different kind of praxis imply different ways in which things manifest themselves as pragmata. As a corollary, pragmata are not to be understood as mere tools or use-values, but more broadly as matters of all kinds of concern or care, ranging from affective to intellectual, discursive and political. This entails that a particular world-horizon is always co-intended when we deal with particular entities. To be sure, Patočka dwells on Husserl’s analysis of horizontal intentionality, according to which the world, as the ultimate horizon, shines behind every perception of an individual object and at the same time participates in the constitution of its meaning. However, Husserl’s notion of world-horizon is unsatisfying inasmuch it serves mostly to identify the ultimate horizon in which all determinations of essences and all genuine knowledge can take place. The general orientation of Husserl’s phenomenology towards securing grounds for knowledge comes at a certain price. The intuitive grasp of an object thus becomes the pattern against which all other intentional modalities must be evaluated and objectivizing intentionality becomes the model of our openness to the world. From the perspective of a more pragmatically oriented phenomenology, the ultimate world-horizon is not to be understood as a co-intended background of intentional acts of consciousness, but rather as the all-encompassing background of practical activities and behaviors accomplished by the bodily and socially situated beings that we are. The ultimate horizon is the world in which we act and suffer and where each particular thing appears in its various meaningful aspects through its insertion to our daily practices. And my involvement in a norm-governed kind of practice determines how things line up with one another, how they stand with regards to each other in a particular phenomenal field. Knowing how to deal with this or that presupposes the ability to master the relevant nexus of the references. This is what allows Heidegger to underline that understanding [Verstehen] is not be constructed as some kind of intellectual vision, but rather in the sense of “being up to it” or “knowing one’s way around things.” Understanding is thus more a matter of doing than of seeing.

The first lesson of Heidegger’s analysis of our everyday circumspection is the holistic structure of understanding. In our concernful dealings with them, things never appear as singular entities, but as nodes in a web of references to other realities and horizons. A dining table, while it is carved by the carpenter, refers to the maple wood as well to various saws, chisels and other tools which are used to make it. This same table, in the context of the other furniture in our apartment, has witnessed our son’s first scribbles, several family disputes, and over time has become a steady focal point around which we talk in the evening about our shared joys and sorrows. Less often than we would
wish, it also serves as a convivial place to invite friends for a glass of wine and a break from the hustle and bustle of the workday. Right now, this same table allows me to write down my thoughts about the problem of world disclosure, while its wide flat surface and sturdy construction support with ease the weight of Patocka’s Complete works and keep them within my reach. In these multiple senses, our table takes the place of the sun around which the members of the family and their activities gravitate and circulate. It exists by and through the relationships that it allows to weave and strengthen, by and through the panoply of transactions that it helps to carry out. The three existential movements are instantiated around it in their mutual interplay. It is the thing itself, always more than a mere tool and always reflecting in its own way one of the fundamental structures of the lifeworld, i.e. the opposition between public and private, since it stands as the pivotal point of the familiar interior in its relative separation from the precarious world outside.

23 Let me anticipate an objection that might come to the mind of a more naturalistically inclined observer. Of course that such paraphernalia as tables and hammers manifest themselves in their availability and referential link to shared human practices – indeed, they were made by humans precisely in order to serve our needs and purposes! However, the objection goes on, the world of pragmata presupposes a world of nature that is already carved out by forces beyond human powers and independent of our discursive articulations. And yet, Heidegger replies, even “the wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind ‘in the sails’” (Heidegger 1977: 70). Once again, we first encounter the various features and aspects of our Umwelt through pragmatically oriented concerns and make sense of them according to our shared and culturally embedded practices. This does not mean, of course, that their existence and appearance is exhausted by this use value alone. The qualities that are manifested by non-instrumental activities differ quite substantially from those mentioned above: the same forest reveals its scenic beauty to a solitary walker; it can also appear as an ecosystem with its own degree of biodiversity through scientific practices such as quadrat or transect sampling. In each case, the very way in which natural beings present themselves to us is relative to our various capacities to deal with them, to interrogate them and to insert them into our transactions.

24 Now, what essential property belongs to a natural element such as gold? A scientific realist might answer that the essence of gold is to have an atomic number of 79. However, such a narrow delineation hardly explains the variety of equally essential characteristics of gold disclosed by other practices, ranging from goldsmith and economic transactions, through sport champions’ decorations, to religious rituals and various art techniques. While arguably all of these rely on the objective rarity of gold and its untarnishable lustre, it is precisely as disclosive practices that they allow some of these essential characteristics to come to the fore with particular prominence. Thus, the Byzantine painting techniques allow the golden features on icons to be perceived as sacred and to emanate a source of unearthly light in Orthodox churches. Under the artist’s brush, the golden colors begin to vibrate and reveal potentialities that remain inaccessible to the experimental techniques of chemical laboratories. The same might be said for other “essential” and even “causal” properties instantiated by natural elements. For example, having an atomic number of 79 is of little value for understanding the effects of gold on migration, trade and environmental history during the so-called gold rushes in California and elsewhere. To put it starkly, it is because of their inclusion in economic transactions rather than in the periodic table of
elements that natural entities, such as gold, lithium or silicon appear as commodities or investment goods. The lesson to be drawn from these examples for the phenomenological account of appearing is the following. It is through the different modalities of praxis that humans open themselves to the intelligence of what is and how it is. In Patočka’s own words: “the pragmatic nature of things means that: they belong to the context of our practice.” (Patočka 1998: 117). Gold will manifest itself variously as belonging to the world of science, the world of religion, the world of art or the world of business, while its meaning, value and even tangible effects within these worlds are shaped by practices that cannot be deduced from a description of gold’s physical properties alone. It is by and through our mutually interrelated activities that we grasp what counts as real in the world we live in.

The corollary of the primacy of practice concerns the historicity of appearing: by reorganizing our practices, we transform the general framework of intelligibility in which each entity makes sense. In putting forward our active and collective involvement in things to be dealt with, the pragmatically oriented phenomenology acquires the means to study how the main structures of the lifeworld take flesh and blood in various historical embodiments. The Middle Ages, unlike our technological age, surely did not consider the world as a reservoir of energy and resources to be exploited. Historical variations of our practices affects the very perception of the most ordinary things. Even the simplest gestures, such as cutting bread, are practices that have different meanings among the ancient Greeks, the early Christians and the contemporary consumer society. When bread accidentally fell on the floor when I was a child, my mother instinctively apologized and kissed it because she spontaneously perceived it as a gift from God. But of course, even she did not perceive bread in the same sense as did the members of early Christian communities. Against Husserl who seeks to uncover the invariant formal structures of the lifeworld, Patočka states explicitly that the lifeworld is not to be conceived as an invariant, since all the features according to which our everydayness is structured are shifting with various background understandings of powers determining our world. And he provides a telling example taken from Greek everydayness:

Humans in a secularized epoch see not only different things but see them differently than one who can say [...] “everything is full of gods” or who invites a stranger to his kitchen because there, too, do gods dwell. (Patočka 1996c: 11)

Thus, not only the manifestation of all beings is solidary of the different types of accomplished movement, but the phenomenal field itself is structured according to historically concretized and specific configurations. Moreover, if the historicity emphasized by Patočka refers to the human capacity to question any simply accepted meaning provided by tradition, it turns out that there is no invariant component of the world that can resist such disruption. “Nothing of the earlier life of acceptance remains in peace [...] everything is cast in a new light” (Patočka 1996c: 39-40) since philosophy and politics have promoted “the spirit of unity in conflict” and opened up the possibility of challenging, in a polemical encounter, every single aspect of the world we have in common. The courage to live an “unsheltered life” – proper to the third movement of existence – amounts to acknowledge that all accepted meaning might be disputed and that in this polemical encounter with tradition and with each other, the very configuration of our common world is at stake.

However, we did not yet address the question of what provides the unity of these various ways of disclosing the world. If the world and its many aspects are revealed
according to the various activities we perform in it, has not the unity of the world disintegrated into the multiplicity of its revealed facets? Have we not lost with it “the world as a whole,” which Patočka identified as the most fundamental problem of philosophy in general? Patočka’s solution to this difficulty consists mainly of a Hegelian turn in which he presents the third movement not only as the overcoming, but also as the incorporation of the first two. From the perspective of being which explicitly assumes its own problematicity (in the third movement), it is possible to consider how the affective sphere of proximity and the instrumental sphere of work contribute to our existence when considered as a whole. Patočka repeatedly emphasizes the polyphonic unity of all the three movements:

The three basic vital movements in their dialectical interrelation make up one movement, the unity of our vital reality. They are linked one to another, presuppose and negate each other [...] When one becomes dominant, the others are there, albeit in the mode of absence. (Patočka 1998: 193)

None of these movements can be understood in isolation; they all relate to each other in the same way that different voices and instruments compose a single symphony. Thus, the variety of our practices is not without a unity: all our “for-the-sake-of-which” are orderly interconnected through their mutual references. For example, the praxis related to the second movement is a necessary condition for our capacity to dedicate ourselves in the movement of care, defense and acceptance. On the other hand, the instrumentality of the second movement, with all its contradictory requirements and frustrations, is the motivation for its own overcoming towards the third one, in which we strive to explicitly address the issue of our existence conceived as a whole. The unity of all various practices in which we engage is never something given, but rather is something to be repeatedly strived for. Our existence as a whole is at stake whenever we are confronted with the diverse and incompatible requirements that are part of our daily tasks.

Thus, we should not misinterpret the third movement of breakthrough as the exclusive domain of philosophers who ask metaphysical questions about what makes life worth living. The practical question of how to exist in a non-alienating way is something readily accessible to any person who works in an unforgiving corporate environment, sacrifices her own personal goals for her family, or is simply going through a major turning point in her private or professional life. Nor should we consider the outcome of such a breakthrough to be a fully coherent unity, given once and for all, of everything we are engaged in. Unlike stones or tables, human beings are not made to exist in perfect coherence with themselves. The only kind of unity they can strive for is the always problematic, perpetually renegotiated unity of the various movements they perform during their lives. Compared to Dreyfus’s emphasis on background practices as the source of all available intelligibility, the superiority of Patočka’s version of the primacy of practice lies precisely in its ability to deal more explicitly with the unity and the being of praxis. As should be clear by now, both these questions require to simultaneously interrogate the being of the person who performs such praxis and whose self-understanding depends on the manner of her projection into a certain possible world.
3. The Practical Notion of Self

The pragmatic disclosure does not merely concern the things themselves, but it also allows to grasp more concretely the kind of being that each of us is. The primacy of practice is thus to be linked to the practical notion of selfhood. Establishing an explicit relation to oneself does not amount to grasping a truth hidden in the depths of one’s interiority, but rather to reinvent one’s way of existing while confronting the contingency of our usual, “natural” ways of living, acting and speaking. Instead of endorsing Husserl’s notion of self-reflection, Patočka argues that I cannot relate to myself in any different way but through dealing with worldly contents. More precisely, for Patočka, the being that I am becomes manifest in the phenomenal field without having, at first, any determinate content on its own. My self is something to be performed, to be achieved, but also to be mediated through the otherness to which it has to be exposed in order to gain its own truth. Heideggerian insights thus resonate in Patočka’s notion of selfhood with heavy Hegelian overtones. Already in The Phenomenology of Spirit, translated to Czech by Patočka, selfhood is neither a given, nor something obtained through a single act, but rather something to be repeatedly ascertained through a normative practice, mostly through repeated self-discipline. In the Elements of the Philosophy of Right, “what the subject is” arises only through “a series of its actions” (Hegel 1991: sect. 124). As Patočka states in his Möglichkeit einer “asubjektiven” Phänomenologie:

There is nothing to be seen on the ego itself [independently from its involvement in the world]: it can only become visible through that by which it is occupied, what it projects or does, precisely in the phenomenal sphere. (Patočka 1991: 283)

Three points deserve to be emphasized in this passage. First, the relationship that each of us has to oneself should not be (mis)construed as the one of observation, that would reach some immanent sphere of consciousness. To expose one’s self is not to form a representation of one’s own mental contents, for the self manifests itself only by its capacity to endorse some projects and to engage with the world in accordance with their meaning. Second, the phenomenal field is to be understood in terms of field of possibilities that appeal the self as the one who is to realize them. The phenomenal sphere cannot be converted or reduced to intentionality, i.e., it cannot be interpreted in terms of a correlation between experiences (Erlebnisse) on the one hand and what appears there on the other. Third, this field is not to be conceived as the result of a constituting subjectivity. Rather, the phenomenal field involves a subject whose actual possibilities of self-realization depend on it.

It might seem at first hand that Patočka is mostly rephrasing Heidegger’s criticism of Husserl. However, Patočka also takes distances from Heidegger:

The transcendence of Dasein is no [...] projecting-forth, in this sense there is no “project,” but a fundamental being-outside-of-itself and receiving-itself. (Patočka 1971: 26)

Against Heidegger, Patočka emphasizes that these possibilities to be realized must not be understood as autonomous projects of Dasein, but rather as “Realisierungappelle” [appeals to realization] addressed to Dasein. In other words, providing appropriate answers to some of these (surely not all) solicitations allows the self to achieve its determinateness, to relate to itself via its encounter with the alterity (of the world and of fellow human beings). One might object that Patočka’s reading of
Heidegger is quite uncharitable in this regard. The fact is that Dasein “understands itself in terms of possibilities” and these are surely embedded in the world itself. Heidegger’s carefully chosen redescription of Dasein as “thrown projection” captures precisely our fundamental non-autonomy vis-à-vis our unchosen facticity.

This is not to say that the overall line of criticism addressed by Patočka to the author of *Sein und Zeit* does not capture real differences. The first resides in their account of the disclosing self and its absorption in the world. For Heidegger, while Dasein accomplishes its being through engaging in everyday activities, it falls prey to mediocrity. We interpret ourselves in terms of the world we instrumentally disclose, we identify ourselves with our serviceability and thus, we forget our innermost possibility. As Patočka (1998: 49) puts this: “Heidegger understands the relation of existence to the world as a *fall* into the world.” Such a derogatory assumption then leads Heidegger to only possible conclusion, when it comes to the possibility for Dasein to own its proper being: 

existence must fight its way out of the world, must be liberated from it by carrying out a certain “purification.” […]. Liberation from the fall into the world is a liberation from this objectification. (ibid.)

For Patočka, influenced in this by Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, objectification is a necessary part of our self-realization and not a sinister leveling down of our innermost possibilities. We simply have to relate to ourselves through what we are not, since our coping with worldly things and other fellow beings is a necessary part of our explication with ourselves. Thus, our relation to the world we pragmatically disclose is “not negative […] but rather positive, it is not a self-loss but the condition of the possibility of self-discovery” (ibid.).

The self, whose way to itself “leads along the way to the world and to others” (ibid.: 59), is always already predetermined by its unchosen, bodily situation. Existence is to be conceived then as Auseinderesetzung [coming to terms] with the unchosen constraints of one’s life, in which all choosing and all agency is made possible by our primary non-autonomy. That’s why Patočka’s notion of practical selfhood is, in the end, different from Heidegger. It does not reside in free Seinkönnen [ability-to-be], but rather in the basic openness to the possibilities that are offered to our embodied “I can,” possibilities which allow the self to be realized within the phenomenal field. Patočka emphasizes this dialectical relation, this mutual mediation between my acting and available worldly matters that allows my self-projecting, in one of his unpublished fragments:

I would have no possibilities if there were no means leading to my possibilities, to my goals; that is to say, I could not discover myself, “open myself,” understand myself, any more than things could show themselves, if my action [of disclosing them through projecting myself in their possibilities] did not exist. (Patočka 2016c: 306)

Understanding who one is requires finding oneself as the Realizator of worldly possibilities, which in turn presupposes understanding of the stakes that are involved in such matters of concern. While the things manifests themselves through my activity, I grasp and understand any activity I perform and identify with from the things themselves and their affordances. No term of the relation is thus determinate by itself, but only through their mutual intra-action. To deploy existential possibilities where a purely objective mind would merely acknowledge a factual situation means to transcend the given, to transform the contingency of our situation into an opportunity for action. Self-awareness is based on our ability to take a stand on ourselves at the
very moment we open ourselves up to the world’s affairs. Being-onself is fundamentally bound up with a world to be what it is, since any self-understanding is dependent upon the way in which we understand the worldly stakes to be endorsed. All this leads to an original notion of “freedom in dependence” (Patočka 1996b: 144) which includes, in particular, a close physical bond with the natural and social world.

4. Freedom in Dependence

The pragmatic disclosure put forward by Patočka incorporates also the lesson from Merleau-Ponty, who states in his *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The thing is constituted in the hold my body has upon it; it is not at first a signification for the understanding, but rather a structure available for inspection by the body.” (Merleau-Ponty 2014: 334). Our experiencing of things is closely tied to our bodily sense of engaging with them in meaningful ways. This inclusion of the body in the existential analytic further deepens Patočka’s critique of Heidegger’s account of world-disclosure.

Heidegger’s analytics make his ontology of existence excessively formal; though praxis is the original form of clarity, he never takes into consideration the fact that the original praxis is necessarily and in principle the activity of a bodily subject, that embodiment must therefore have an ontological status [...]. (Patočka 2016a: 153)

Patočka’s point consists in emphasizing that Dasein’s pragmatic disclosure (through answering solicitations of phenomenal field) involves motion and, hence, embodiment. Patočka endows the Dasein with a motor body that inscribes it in the world and makes it more dependent on the worldly processes. This amounts to a more consistent development of our belonging to the world than what we can find in Heidegger. Furthermore, it explains better than Heidegger does how my self-projecting into possibilities brings about my realization under the form of concrete tasks to be accomplished. It is because of our radical corporeal situatedness in the world – our dependency upon it – that things appear first and foremost as *pragmata*, that we exist in their proximity. The ontological basis of my being-in-the-world is my capacity to move myself while being moved by worldly solicitations. “The possibility of self-motion” is thus an ontological basis, the first and primordial possibility, giving rise to all the other possibilities. If being-in-the-world consists of actually grasping possibilities, it has effectivity only as a motor realization, which means that embodiment belongs to its existential structure. Such an inscription of bodily movement among fundamental existential structures amounts to recognize important constraints to our freedom.

1st constraint: My bodily nature implies that I am not entirely transparent to myself and cannot grasp what makes me think and act by reflexively turning my experience into an object of consideration. For Patočka, as for Merleau-Ponty, theoretical reflection cannot escape the opacity of the facts and of ourselves, since my kinesthetic experiences, gut feelings, embodied habits and inherited drives has always already articulated worldly matters in a way inaccessible to conscious reflection. Although I can grasp some of my implicit motivations through conscious reflection and translate tacit solicitations to move myself into explicit reasons to act, the possibility of a complete adequacy between the act of reflection and the content to be reflected is excluded. Such opacity can only be dealt with practically in all our projections, our actions and our dealings with others.
My body is the unchosen prerequisite of my freedom. I must assume my body in what it requires from me: my first possibilities are consequently the imperatives that my condition of living being makes unavoidable. In criticizing Heidegger for failing to emphasize the explicitly corporeal character of \textit{Befindlichkeit} [affective self-finding] and for failing to acknowledge the existential status of the body, Patočka (2016a: 155) states: “What I want to accomplish ‘for the sake of my being’ is always codetermined by what I have to accomplish in order to be able to do or accomplish anything at all.” From the point of view of existence, my body is “the totality of possibilities that we do not choose but into which we are inserted, those for which we are not free, those we have to be” (ibid.: 153). I can only be the center of action and orientation as a being that thirsts, needs to breathe, and seeks to ensure its optimal grasp of the world by moving through it. Moreover, it is from the satisfaction of the most primary needs that I derive, at the ontogenetic level, my sense of the difference between dissatisfaction and fulfillment. My body, in all its opacity and dependency upon the world, in all its recalcitrance to my will, is nothing contingent, but constitutes the \textit{ontological basis} for all my self-projecting and all my dealings with worldly matters.

Being \textit{finite} means being \textit{limited by the world} in what you can disclose. More precisely, my freedom to make sense of the world is proportional to the world’s capacity to provide me with the means to carry out my projects. It is the materiality of my own body that confronts me with the harshness, precariousness and sometimes unfamiliarity of the world to which I am exposed. It is an emblem of my belonging to a totality that I cannot master. Only to a disembodied spirit the world could appear as a totality of objects, waiting to be discovered, grasped and made fully transparent in their known features. To someone whose existence depends upon what is disclosed, the world manifests itself as full of promises, but also threats, as a landscape of passable or impassable roads, as a field of attractors and resistances. My freedom is thus both enabled and constrained by worldly affordances and the shared norms of engaging with them. Patočka emphasizes more explicitly than Heidegger our dependence upon ongoing situations:

\begin{quote}
I do not create the possibilities, rather they create me; they come to me from outside, from the world which is a framework for them in which things show themselves as means and I show myself as the one who realizes the ends served by these means. (Patočka 2016c: 306)
\end{quote}

The possibilities precede my singular way of projecting myself. Patočka recognizes Dasein’s dependence on what is already there, before I can question it, endorse it, appropriate it in my project turned towards the future.

The \textit{4th} constraint comes also from the finitude of my embodied praxis. Being finite does not just mean being mortal, or being-towards-the-death, as Heidegger would have it. It underlies the far more basic fact that I can only engage in one disclosive activity at a time, since I am bodily situated. Thus, I have to choose between academic writing, improving my fitness through sport practice or spending time with my family and participating to my little son’s progresses. The extent of what I have not done is no less decisive for what I am, so that the poet can say “Je plie sous le fardeau de tout ce que je n’ai pas fait.”

The \textit{5th} constraint involves the social normativity underlying all practical dealings with the world. As we have already seen, there is a reciprocal mediation between my ability to realize possibilities inherent to the things themselves and my self-understanding: “I understand things from myself, from activity, but I understand myself, my activity from...
the things.” (Patočka 2016a: 153). However, such a reciprocity is not twofold, but threefold: I can only be certain that I truly understand things to the extent that the others recognize me as someone who really knows how to deal with them. For that matter, I understand myself only insofar as I am able to share with the other(s) some aspects of our common situation. In addition, my actions, steps or commitments open up certain possibilities for your possible actions; they also represent a kind of solicitations that allow you to show who you are by grasping them, responding to them or rejecting them. And for most of our lives, none of the possibilities that matter are something we can achieve on our own, without relying on others. And the shared norms that govern all such interactions are there precisely in order to increase our power to act and to think in mutual interplay.

To prolong Patočka’s emphasis on possibilities preceding my free projection into them in a more pragmatic way, we should add that what is possible and impossible depends in large part on the set of available practices which allow my undertaking to be recognized as intelligible in the public sphere. Our bounded freedom consists then in the active endorsement of this facticity, that goes hand in hand with the acknowledged contingency of available practices. So, we do not just share a practical background against which what each of us is doing becomes intelligible. Rather, our for-the-sakes-of-which (our goals and projects) are interwoven together, insofar as we co-determine each other’s possibilities to act.

Conclusion

My pragmatist interpretation of Jan Patočka’s existential phenomenology presents several advantages over the already existing attempts of reading Heidegger’s analysis of Dasen through pragmatist lens. First of all, it avoids the Heideggerian disregard for das Man as the source of pseudo-intelligibility that is hardly compatible with Dreyfus’ claim according to which the “coping with the available” represents our primordial understanding of the world. Dwelling on Patočka’s account of the collective emergence of a shared, meaningful world within the first two movements of existence, my account of pragmata – redefined as common concerns to be dealt with collectively – allows me to present the public sphere not as the sinister set of restraints imposed on individual Dasein, but rather as the enabling horizon against which what each of us is doing becomes intelligible. Rather, our for-the-sakes-of-which (our goals and projects) are interwoven together, insofar as we co-determine each other’s possibilities to act.

Patočka’s emphasis on our bodily belonging to the world provides fertile ground for future encounters between pragmatism and phenomenology, insofar it locates the origins of phenomenality in the interest that we have in our being. The world shows itself up to us in its various manifestations precisely because we are – as living beings non-indifferent to their way of life – full of interests. To be sure, such an insight alone is not sufficient to close the gap between the naturalistic and the transcendental orientation of contemporary philosophy, but it at least indicates the direction in which such an opposition might be overcome from the phenomenologists’ side.
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NOTES


2. Mark Sinclair (2006: 48-9) argues that Heidegger’s analysis of equipment does not represent a positive philosophical thesis, but rather the unearthing of practical and pre-thematic horizons of experience that underlie the ontological concepts of Western metaphysics.
3. This is the position espoused by James Mensch in his defense of a non-pragmatic disclosure of the world in an attitude motivated by philosophical wonder or confrontation with one’s own finitude (Mensch 2017).

4. See Rouse 1996.


8. My account of the third movement as a modality of praxis is also emphasized in a recent interpretation of Patočka’s phenomenology provided by Martin Ritter (2017: 241): “Philosophy, as one of the exemplary manifestations of the third movement, is a worldly philosophy, which is not theory of the world [...]. Philosophy can be conceived as a historically conditioned ‘inquiring way’,” i.e., as one form of inquiring practice alongside others.

9. Patočka (2004: 418). Patočka rephrases the same idea in his “Afterword to the first French Translation” of his Natural World as a Philosophical Problem: “A situation which we have not chosen and cannot justify, yet which is nonetheless ours, and for which we bear responsibility – this is one of the fundamental characteristics of human finitude.” (Patočka 2016b: 167).


11. See Dreyfus & Taylor (2015: 149-53) for a cogent development of a similar example.


13. This position is, in my view, compatible with the basic outline of Patočka’s phenomenology, although it contradicts several passages in which the Czech thinker emphasizes the spiritual practice of conversion, i.e. the “care of the soul,” as the principal and, in fact, the only way to recollect one’s own existence from its dispersion into particularities. For a convincing criticism of Patočka’s unilateral emphasis on the spiritual overcoming of the crisis, see Ritter (2019: 155-9).

14. “As long as it is, Dasein always has understood itself and will understand itself in terms of possibilities.” (Heidegger 1977: 145).

15. “I bend under the burden of all that I have not done.” (Valéry 1973, I: 29).

ABSTRACTS

The aim of my paper is to reformulate the Husserlian problem of phenomena from a more pragmatic perspective, inspired by Jan Patočka. Instead of searching for a correlation between transcendent being and its subjective modes of givenness, the pragmatically oriented phenomenology should ask: How does the appearance of things unfold through our different modes of engaging with the world? In order to answer such a question, I propose to interpret the three movements of human existence differentiated by Patočka as three forms of praxis and to demonstrate that each of them is deploying its own way of making things intelligible. In the end, Patočka’s account of existence in terms of movement provides a much more fruitful grounds than Heidegger’s fundamental ontology for incorporating the basic tenets of pragmatism, such as a shift to practices, an anti-intellectualist account of sense-making, and the fundamental dependency of the subject upon the public space of shared concerns.