Philosophy as an Art of Dying

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"*It is only thanks to death that our life serves us to express ourselves*." (Pier Paolo Pasolini)

1. Taming death

In Plato's *Apology* the words "death," "dying," or "fear of death" appear relatively late in the body of the text (starting with about 28b, the *Apology* ranging from 17 to 42). They emerge timidly in the first speech Socrates delivered in front of the jury. Yet, once they have made their appearance, these words are used with increased frequency, which certainly betrays a growing uneasiness in Socrates' state of mind. He keeps reassuring his audience – but especially himself – that there is absolutely no reason to be afraid of death. We should not be afraid of death because, according to him, to be afraid of death is just "another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows when one does not know." (Plato 1997: 15 [29a-b, trans. H. Tredennick]) About death we do not, and cannot, have any positive knowledge; therefore we cannot, and should not, be afraid of it. To be afraid of something, one has first to know what that something is. In fact, as Socrates will show later in the *Apology*, whatever death might be, it is *absolutely* nothing to be afraid of:

> Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or… it is really a change – a migration of the soul from this place to another. Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvelous gain. […] If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this? (Plato 1997: 25 [40c-d, trans. H. Tredennick])

Socrates might be right. Death might be indeed the greatest blessing one can ever have access to, or at least some never-ending dreamless sleep. Yet, in a certain sense, the whole problem comes precisely from this uncertainty about *what precisely death is*. Either of the two possibilities indicated by Socrates would be equally acceptable, but we do not know for sure *which one* is actually the case. Death might not be a bad thing after all, but the whole problem comes exactly from this little "might." For Socrates the intellectualist, for the Socrates who held that people do evil only out of ignorance, and that if they knew what the good is, this knowledge would make them almost automatically virtuous – for this Socrates, who equated knowledge with virtue and happiness, not knowing what death exactly is must have been a very painful realization. Death is *either* that *or* that: to the lover of clear-cut conceptual distinctions and perfectly matching definitions that Socrates was, this fundamental ambiguity of death, its dark conceptual nature, eternally defying our understanding, must have given him a sense of

ultimate philosophical humiliation. It must have been for him a source of endless anguish and terror.

To put it differently, to the question "Was Socrates afraid of death at these moments?" one reasonable answer is: "Of course, he was." He must have been. He was seventy; he had already lived a long life, long enough to understand many things. Life is a highly addictive drug: the longer one has lived, the more dependent on living one is. It is easier, if tragic, to die when one is young, than when one is old. This is why martyrdom comes in most cases from youth and from a soul that has not yet become too deeply attached to this world. When one is 20 or even 30 one makes a better martyr: one has not had enough time to understand what life really is; by this age one does not by necessity fully know what one leaves behind and what is ahead[1]. But when you are seventy, you must certainly be afraid of dying. By the age of seventy, one has grown deep enough into the world and the world has grown deep into one. Any separation cannot be otherwise than extremely painful. Therefore, martyrdom at seventy must be a really complex and difficult operation, and Socrates had his reasons to be afraid of dying.

No doubt, a perfectly heroic Socrates, a Socrates who has never – not for one second – felt any fear of death would be certainly glorious. This would be quasi-divine Socrates, one beyond the constraints and limitations of the flesh. But a Socrates who had to make efforts to overcome his fear of death, who had to find his courage precisely in the depths of his fear is definitely much more glorious. Opposed as they are, courage and fear are not necessarily unrelated. As it happens, sometimes extreme heroism is born precisely out of extreme anguish, and the most admirable courage out of the biggest fear. In *Disturbing the Peace* Havel makes an interesting confession about this dialectical process through which courage and heroism are being born precisely out of one another. He openly admits that his "alleged courage and stamina spring from fear." That is, from fear of his own conscience, which "delights in tormenting me for real and imaginary failures." He disarmingly confesses that all his "heroic time in prison" was "one long chain of worries, fears, and terrors." He recalls:

> I was a frightened, terrified child, confusedly present on this earth, afraid of life, and eternally doubting the rightness of his place in the order of things; I probably bore prison worse than most of those who admired me would. Whenever I heard the familiar shout in the hallways, "Havel!," I would panic. Once, after hearing my name yelled out like that, I jumped out of bed without thinking and cracked my skull on the window. (Havel 1990: 204-5)

The whole last part of Socrates' first speech (until 36a) is a sophisticated approach to *taming* death and dying. Thanks to Plato's excellent narrative in the *Apology*, we witness here a Socrates who *is gradually approaching* death, in its multifarious condition (as a

[1] Not to say anything here about the fascination that dying young sometimes causes. Peter France mentions "the Romantic scheme of things" where "an early tragic death is read as a mark of election." (France 2000: 11)

philosophical notion, as a source of anguish, as a not-so-remote occurrence, as an imminent encounter). We witness a Socrates who is willy-nilly learning how to make new room for death in his heart. Socrates is familiarizing himself with the idea of dying, to embracing it; he is trying to "humanize" death, to gradually overcome his fear of it: "if I am what I claim to be, and you put me to death, you will harm yourselves more than me." (Plato 1997: 16 [30c, trans. H. Tredennick]); "I would never submit wrongly to any authority through fear of death, but would refuse even at the cost of my life" (32a) or: "I again made it clear not by words but my actions that death did not matter to me at all – if that is not too strong an expression – but that it mattered all the world to me that I should do nothing wrong or wicked." (32d) In all these statements Socrates is simply *too* insistent on his not being afraid of death not to draw our attention to it. Someone who would not indeed be afraid of dying would spend less time on the topic of death. But this very insistence has also a *performative* role: Socrates is not so much trying to convince us that he is not afraid of dying as he is persuading *himself*.

On the other hand, Socrates has to make sure that he is not sending an ambiguous message to his judges. No matter how much he is afraid of death, he is even more afraid of living an unworthy life. He reassures his audience that he is not willing at all to betray himself, to betray what he has been teaching throughout his life. This is why he tells them repeatedly that, regardless the outcome of the trial, he would never change his way of life. Envisaging the possibility that his judges would acquit him on the condition that he would stop philosophizing ("If we catch you going on in the same way, you shall be put to death"), Socrates makes it clear, in advance, that he would never accept such a humiliating condition:

> I should reply, Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. (Plato 1997: 15-6 [29d-e, trans. H. Tredennick])

Socrates might have been afraid of death, but he was much more afraid of living an un-Socratic life.

2. The kamikaze philosopher

One of the turning points in the *Apology* occurs when the first vote of the jury takes place and the majority of it considers Socrates guilty as charged. Socrates' disappointment in his fellow-Athenians must have been enormous. Even if this first vote was only about establishing whether Socrates was guilty or not, the sheer fact that most of the jury voted "guilty" was for him a clear indication that his civic-educational mission in the city of Athens has failed and therefore that his life in this city has become somehow meaningless. It must have been around that time that Socrates probably fully realized that, under such circumstances, the best thing for him was to die. This outcome showed only that nothing of what he had said in his first speech convinced the jury that he was right, and his accusers wrong. The Athenians became deaf to his arguments (or only tired

of them), and all the brilliant rhetoric he had employed in his first speech in the court left them unmoved. It had become obvious to Socrates that neither reasoning nor speaking was the way to reach them. Between himself and his fellow-Athenians there was now a huge gap of misunderstanding and suspicion, and he realized that no words or discourses could ever bridge this gap. The majority's "guilty" vote convinced him that whatever arguments, however clever, he might add to what he already said would never reach his fellow-citizens' minds or hearts.

Socrates thus found himself with only one thing left: his own life. He had to make *the most of it*, to arrange things in such a manner that his death would bring him maximum of profit. By the means of his dying body he had to "say" what he could not say with his whole mastery of the Greek language. He had to turn his own flesh into something most persuasive. Confronted with the deaf ears of the Athenians, it was pointless for him to make any speeches anymore: all he could do now was to express himself by the most radical means, namely, by the means of his own body, *letting it die* in a most spectacular manner, so that nobody could ignore, and not "listen to," it. Since life is one of those things that one loses only once, knowing how to make it most profitable must be indeed a very delicate business; marketing your own death is a truly "one-shot" exercise. You have to know very well what things can, and especially what things cannot be done; any mistake in the process is the only mistake.

With very limited means at his disposal, in the short period of time that was left to him, Socrates had to transform his death into a most expressive gesture, into something that – from his point of view – would serve his cause as brilliantly as possible. He was heading towards his own death anyway: all he had to do now was to make sure that he would not miss the target and this unique event would bring him, then and there but also posthumously, the maximum of profit in terms of honor, self-overcoming, exemplarity, heroism[2]. It is exactly the kamikaze pilot's strategy. Socrates was now a kamikaze who had to make his death as *eloquent* as possible. Understanding that, being already 70, sooner or later he would die anyway, and – more importantly – that asking for forgiveness (or for a lighter penalty) would cast an embarrassing shadow on his name, he decided that the right moment has come for him to die. The true genius of Socrates' *daimon* was that, this time, it did not show up: "I am quite clear that the time had come when it was better for me to die and be released from my distractions. This is why my sign never turned me back." (Plato 1997: 26 [41d, trans. H. Tredennick])

It was not even gambling; it was almost as simple as a basic problem of mathematics: putting into balance what his death would bring him now and what his remaining life might give him in the future, Socrates realized that the former is the more profitable solution. In Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates* he is even recorded as saying:

> if I should now grow older, I know that I must face the frailties of old age – to see and hear less well, to be slow to learn and to be more forgetful of

[2] "The *dying Socrates* became the new ideal, never seen before, of noble Greek youths." (Nietzsche qtd. in Ahrensdorf 1995: 2)

> what I've learned. And, should I perceive myself becoming worse and blame myself, how... would I still be able to live pleasantly? (Xenophon in Brickhouse & Smith [*eds.*] 2002, 82-3)

First of all, Socrates had to make sure that he would get indeed the death penalty and nothing less than the death penalty. For he could have ended up somewhere in the limbo, neither dead nor alive – exiled, for example – having to face, for the rest of his life, the shame of having asked for forgiveness from people whom he had chastised all his life; dying sooner or later an inglorious (natural) death. The trick he used was a brilliant one. Once he had been found guilty, as is well known, his accusers were to propose a penalty (they proposed the death penalty) and, in his turn, Socrates had to come with a counterproposal. At this point, instead of proposing an alternative penalty (naturally, lighter than his accusers'), Socrates considered that, after a life like his, one dedicated to the moral and spiritual well-being of the city of Athens, what he really deserved was not a penalty, but some considerable reward. More specifically, he asked the Athenians to provide him with free maintenance for the rest of his life:

> Nothing could be more appropriate for such a person than free maintenance at the state's expense. He deserves it much more than any victor in the races at Olympia… These people give you the semblance of success, but I give you the reality… So if I am to suggest an appropriate penaltywhich is strictly in accordance with justice, I suggest free maintenance by the state. (Plato 1997: 22 [36d-37a, trans. H. Tredennick])

This was the safest way to get the death penalty and nothing less. Anything less would have spoiled all his endeavors. To make sure that there was absolutely no way out for him, in his final speeches Socrates exercised his irony even more sharply than before: "being convinced that I do no wrong to anybody, I can hardly be expected to wrong myself by asserting that I deserve something bad, or by proposing a corresponding penalty." (37b) There are no traces of self-censorship left in his final speeches: having nothing to lose, Socrates is now at his boldest. What he is practicing might well be called "suicide rhetoric." Everything is being told, nothing is being concealed anymore; there are no secrets, everything is in the open: "In a court of law, just as in warfare, neither I nor any other ought to use his wits to escape death by any means." (38e-39a); "the difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong, which is far more fleet of foot" (39a); "It is not a lack of arguments that has caused my condemnation, but a lack of effrontery and impudence, and the fact that I have refused to address you in the way which would give you most pleasure." (38d) Nothing would stop Socrates from telling frankly the Athenians what he thought of them. Not that he still hoped to teach them how to live their lives, but probably he took it as a way of rounding off his own life. His final speeches are not so much about Athens and the Athenians, as about Socrates' bitter disappointment in them:

> If you expect to stop denunciation of your wrong way of life by putting people to death, there is something amiss with your reasoning. This way of escape is neither possible nor creditable. The best and easiest way is not to

> stop the mouths of others, but to make yourselves as good men as you can. (39d-e)

The Socratic strategy worked with excellent results. He got indeed the death penalty and died a most glorious death. Since his death he has been ranked "among the most glorious of heroes and the most holly of martyrs. He was to be compared continuously with the warrior Alexander, the citizen Cato, and the divine Jesus." (Ahrensdorf 1995: 2) His death has always been regarded as that kind of death that makes one's life most meaningful. It was to become the supreme model for all the other philosophical deaths, indeed, the archetypal philosophical death. Thanks precisely to Socrates' actual death, philosophy understood as a "preparation for death" or "practicing death" has become an essential feature of the Western philosophers' self-representation. Much of Montaigne cannot be understood without it. Later Voltaire would say about Socrates' death: "The death of this martyr was actually the apotheosis of philosophy" (qtd. in Ahrensdorf 1995: 2) and Jacques Maritain saw Socrates' death as "the most sublime death to which merely human wisdom can lead." (qtd. in Ahrensdorf 1995: 1)

3. (Almost nothing about) Patočka's life

Jan Patočka died on March 13, 1977, in a Prague hospital, shortly after his seventieth birthday. The cause was his death was a "massive brain hemorrhage suffered under police interrogation. Over the preceding two months, he had been interrogated repeatedly, the last interrogation lasting over eleven hours." (Kohák 1989: 3) He was interrogated as one of the leaders (spokespersons) of the Charter 77, movement in which he had become involved over the preceding year. Patočka was one of those who actually wrote the Charter (even if the document was to be considered the collective work of all its signatories); he gathered new signatures, wrote various manifestoes in its support and did everything in his power to promote it.

Václav Havel was among the initiators of the movement and, along with some other dissidents, he was directly involved in inviting Patočka to join the Charter. They felt from the very beginning that Patočka, "better than anyone else, could impress upon the Charter a moral dimension." (Havel 1990: 135) In Patočka the Charter would have got then an uncontested moral leader, someone who had not been involved in politics (neither Communist nor otherwise), and whom everybody respected, thus conferring upon the movement a certain sense of unity and direction. In *Disturbing the Peace* Havel tells the story of Patočka's joining the movement. There was something deeply a-political about him. He "had never before been directly involved in politics, and he'd never had any direct, sharp confrontation with the powers that be. In such matters he was reluctant, shy, and reserved." (Havel 1990: 135) In other words, he must have learned from Socrates – just as any reasonable philosopher should – that the one who is really seeking justice, "if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone." (Plato 1997: 17 [32a, trans. H. Tredennick]) This is why his strategy vis-à-vis the official politics was, in Havel's words, very much like "the strategy of trench warfare." He tried

> to hold out as long as he could without compromise, but he never went on the attack himself. He was utterly dedicated to philosophy and teaching, and he never modified his opinions, but he did try to avoid things that might have put an end to his work. (Havel 1990: 135)

It might well be the case that Patočka simply postponed his involvement in dissident politics because he always knew that, if he would get involved in it, he could not do it otherwise than totally, without reservation, without any net for protection beneath him ("completely, leaving himself no emergency exits, with the same perseverance he devoted to philosophizing." [Havel 1990: 135]), accepting all the consequences and ready to die. But "ready to die" is a limit-experience, a radical situation, something quite out of the ordinary order of things. Before one's being ready to die (if ever one is), this notion must grow in one until it reaches its natural maturation, however long this process might take.

Moreover, there is something that, for a while at least, must have made it difficult for Patočka to dedicate himself to such a deadly business as dissident politics. This is about a certain dimension of his philosophy and, probably, of his own personality. There is a distinct sense in which Patočka's philosophy is a continual celebration of life, of the process of life, a hymn to living and the world of living. Deeply rooted into the phenomenological tradition, where life, body, embodiment, *Lebenswelt*, "lived experience" are always central topics[3], much of Jan Patočka's philosophizing is dedicated to a detailed phenomenological analysis of such notions as acceptance, "sinking roots," earth, home, care, and other related notions. His philosophy is permeated throughout by a deep sense of attachment to the fundamental unity of everything that is alive, to everything that breaths, that is born, gives birth and lives. Reminiscent somehow of Aristotle's, Patočka's writings betray a distinct metaphysical sensibility towards the biological, towards the comic chain of life, the warmth of living organisms, the infinite processes of birth, growths, change, decay. There is a sense of cosmic *sympathy* one comes across very often in Patočka's philosophy: he does not so much think the world out, as he *feels* it. Patočka's philosophy is a *caring* philosophy. For example, for him, treating the body as simply an object of the outside world would be not only an error of thought, but also some form of *injustice* done to the body itself. The body is not something that our thought is *about*, but human body is present *in* the very process of thinking, precisely as something that makes it possible. In the lectures published as *Body, Community, Language, World* Patočka says at some point: "That *living* body is the presupposition of our even being aware of an anatomical and a physiological body. Such subjective body is no mere reflection of the objective body. It is subjective, but it is also objective in the sense of being a necessary condition of life, of lived experience."

[3] Patočka always wanted that philosophy must be phenomenological "not in the embarrassingly petty sense of departmental partisan warfare but in the universal sense of retaining the vision of experience as meaningful even in the absence of a God to act as the provider and guarantor of meaning." (Kohak 1989: 132)

(Patočka 1997: 3)[4] Maybe the word "mystical" would be too strong a word to describe the exact nature of Patočka's attitude to the world of living, but it would not be completely inappropriate either[5].

Jan Patočka sees human condition as been characterized, in an essential way, by "self-movement,"[6] and he distinguishes "three movements of human life": a movement of "self-anchoring,[7] a movement of "self-sustenance" (or "self-projection")[8] and a third movement of superior (specifically human) existence.[9] The first of these movements is the most relevant for a discussion of Patočka's attachment to the world of living. In this movement, our first, we seek desperately a home, a place to stay, some warm corner of the universe where life is not threatened: "The acceptance of the newborn into human warmth compensates for the separation of the body, for bodily individuation." (Patočka

[4] See also Merleau-Ponty's similar reflections on the body (Merleau-Ponty 1968). For example: "I cannot take it [the body] to pieces and reform it to make a clear idea. Its unity is always implicit and vague. It is always other than what it is, always sexuality and at the same time freedom, rooted in nature at the very moment when it is transformed by cultural influences, never hermetically sealed and never left behind. Whether it is a question of another's body or my own, I have no means of knowing the human body other than that of living it, which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it. I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I posses experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a 'natural' object." (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 212)

[5] In *Body, Community, Language, World* (Patočka 1997) Patočka advances the sketch of a fascinating earth-centered environmental philosophy: "As moving beings, we are drawn to something that is motionless, that is eternally the unshakeable ground – the earth. The earth is the referent of bodily movement as such, as that which is not in motion, which is firm. At the same time we experience the earth as a power…, something that has no counterpart in our lived experience. It is a power also as the earth that feeds us, something that penetrates us globally. By our nature, by the structuring of our life, we are *earthlings*. The corporeity of what we strive for in our life testifies to the power of the earth in us." (Patočka 1997: 149)

[6] "The movement of *self-anchoring, of self-loss in self-sustenance and of self-finding in self-surrender.* This movement is a movement in the most primordial, strongest sense of the word; each of *our* physical movements is in reality a part of this all-embracing overall movement that we are.... Our birth is a movement, our acceptance, our encounter with things in perceptions, our instinctive reactions, our self-reproduction in dependence on others as well as in our own achievements, in work." (Patočka 1989: 269)

[7] "the movement of sinking roots, of anchoring – an instinctive-affective movement of our existence" (Patočka 1997: 148)

[8] "the movement of self-sustenance, of self-projection – the movement of our coming to terms with the reality we handle, a movement carried out in the region of human work" (Patočka 1997: 148)

[9] "the movement of existence in the narrower sense of the word which typically seeks to bestow a global closure and meaning on the regions and rhythms of the first and second movement." (Patočka 1997: 148)

1997: 149) With impressive poetical force, reminiscent of Heidegger (whose disciple he was, in fact), Patočka talks extensively about our primordial need for *home* in order to be able to sink roots. In his essay "The 'natural' world and phenomenology" he shows how a home is

> a place where the sinking of roots among things take place, that is, where needs are met, through the mediation of others. What is needed, though, must be *procured*, secured, and that takes place only partially in the home – the activity of procuring what is needed, work, entails an outside, the work place, the domain of objectivity. (Patočka 1989: 260)

At this initial stage, for Patočka, we relate to the world around, we approach it and seek to understand it, in the terms dictated by the ontology of dwelling: home, shelter, homelessness, alien, familiar, acceptance, rejection. Thus, the issue of hospitality, of the other's openness towards us, emerges, which places Patočka in the context of a series of recent discussions in Continental philosophy, especially in Derrida (Derrida 2000):

> the entire world can be a mother's lap, can be a worm, cordial, smiling, and protective glass globe, or there may be in it the cosmic cold with its deadening, icy breath – and both are closely linked to whether in the world and out of the world someone smiles at us and meets us responsively. (Patočka 1989: 264)

Life, human life, is possible only within this space of openness, where people when come across each other, smile to one another. Smiling is for Patočka an indication that life has become possible: a smile brings about the possibility of this life. In the luckier parts of the world the praise that Patočka brings to the "smiling face" of others, to the world as a warm and welcoming place, might not be conveying anything beyond a worn-out truism, but to an East-European or Russian ear, such a praise is hard to over-evaluate. It carries with it a profound, immemorial wisdom:

> The possibility of life is the possibility of this warmth, of this reciprocal smile, of this prevenient acceptance under protection which is simultaneously a placing of our own being into the hands of another... That means that life is only possible as *already* entering a prepared warmth, in the passivity of being penetrated by the state of *acceptance*, and so only on the basis of a past that lets us lower an anchor, sink roots. (Patočka 1989: 264)

This whole discussion about "sinking roots," home and acceptance betrays, I think, on Patočka's side, a sense of (comfortable enough) insertion into the world of life, a successful adaptation to the rhythms of living. To be able say, as Patočka does in *Body, Community, Language*, that "by our nature, by the structuring of our life, we are *earthlings*. The corporeity of what we strive for in our life testifies to the power of the earth in us." (Patočka 1997: 149) means to have been somehow enchanted by the earthly

condition and to have enjoyed a deep sense of symbiosis with it. In other words, Patočka must have felt well ("at home") into this world and found it easy enough to connect to it, to its objects, to its functions and working patters.

Therefore, it can be safely said that by the age of seventy, by the time of his political involvement in the Charter 77, Patočka had grown deep into the world and the world had grown deep into him; his extraction from it could not be otherwise than extremely painful. He must have found it easy enough to connect to people, too, and be on friendly terms with everybody. As he said, the "instinctual affective bonding is the basis of safety, of vital warmth." (Patočka 1997: 157) He shared this vital warmth with his neighbors, with his pupils, with everybody he knew. Ironically enough, he seemed to have come to be on friendly terms even with the cops who were tailing him. There is a report – and even if it is not true, it is quite telling – that mentions one of these cops' devastation at Patočka's funeral. This cop had "identified [himself] with Patočka so strongly that he forced himself into an acquaintance of sorts with the professor and wanted to speak a few words over his grave." (Kriseová 1993: 131) The whole world, with Patočka's cop in it, must have grown deep into Patočka, and Patočka must have grown equally deep into it, in his cop included. Only half-jokingly, through Patočka's extraction from the world something fundamental in the cop died too.

4. Death and "care for the soul"

But "sinking roots," immersion into the "vital warmth" of the world of living is only a *first* movement, only one of the stages that human life has to go through to be properly human. Living at this biological stage means taking part not only in the positivity of life (birth, growth, flourishing), but also in its opposite: decay, corruption, degeneration, and death. To be specifically human, one has always to "overcome" this first stage; being human is precisely about this overcoming.

No matter how fascinated he was by the world of living, for Patočka there is also something fundamentally precarious about human life. In *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* he describes human life as "a life perennially threatened, dedicated to death, and devoted to work – that is, to unceasingly turning back this threat which in the end is always victorious." (Patočka 1996: 17) At its most basic, life is always projected against a "dark background" of death, destruction and nothingness. Human beings come into life

> not only conceived by and born of those who live, but also accepted by them and dependent on their care, and they leave life equally dependent on those whom they had themselves accepted. In this dependence we stand not only in the context of the world of life which is subject to the bondage of work, but rather life… is itself a part of the dark landscape of the world to which the gods, too, had access when they sent death into the world and enslaved humans to life and toil. (Patočka 1996: 22)

Human life is a life lived in the shadow of death. No matter how far one goes, one will never go far enough to escape it. Following in Heidegger's footsteps, Patočka saw death, the prospect of dying, as being parts and parcel of life. To overcome this fundamental ontological precariousness there only one solution: simply to look death in the face. Patočka elaborates on Plato's allegory of the cave and considers that the Platonic philosopher could overcome death precisely "by not fleeing from it but by facing up to it." The philosophy of the one who escapes the cave is *meletē thanatou* (preparation for death), which Patočka, interestingly, translated simply with "care for death." Moreover, he says that "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, of an overcoming of death." (Patočka 1996: 105)

Care for the soul is famously one of the fundamental concepts in Patočka's philosophy. He deals with it in many of his works (essays, articles, underground lectures and seminars), but the series of lectures published under the title *Plato and Europe* (Patočka 2002) is of special interest for the purpose of the present essay. In these lectures he sees care for the soul as being at the very foundation of the European mind; European philosophy is, for him, simply unconceivable in the absence of this care for the soul. Thanks to it, we have a good means to overcome our mortality and our instinctive fear of death. Care of the soul is what makes possible whatever is properly human in us: morality, thought, culture, history. Care for the soul is the most sacred thing in us; through it we become connected to what is eternal, yet without having to leave this world: it is "the attempt to embody what is eternal within time, and within one's own being, and at the same time, and effort to stand firm in the storm of time, stand firm in all dangers carried with it." (Patočka 2002: 87) Care of the soul is what confers upon the soul a clear sense of order, self-consistency and inner beauty. Only through it

> does the soul become what it can be – harmonious, not in contradiction, no longer running the risk of shattering into contradictory pieces, thus finally joining something that endures, that is solid. This is the basis of our acting morally, and this is also the foundation of thought, for only thinking that shows what is solid, stable, shows what is. (Patočka 2002: 86)

A soul that indeed cares for itself does not float aimlessly at the surface of things, but approaches them in a disciplined and right fashion. A self-caring soul does not do any injustice to things; it treats them as what they really are. A soul that really cares for itself cares for the things too. This admirable epistemic correctness that a self-caring soul displays outwardly is only the reflection of an inner order and of an inner life dedicated to rigorous thinking:

> The care of the soul is the internal forming of the soul itself, forming into something unyieldingly solid, into existence in this sense, because of the very fact that it is occupied with thinking. And it is a precise thinking, a bounded, limited one. For that reason the soul gets a certain form, it does not become dispersed. (Patočka 2002: 86)

Yet, all this preoccupation with the inner life of the soul should not give the impression that care for the soul is something individualistic or a-social. On the contrary, care of the soul has an essential social dimension: the "proper place of the care for the soul" is the *polis*, which is also "the proper place of history" (Patočka 1996: 103). In fact, the life of the soul is unconceivable outside the life of the community within witch that soul finds itself. Even at its most basic level (at the stage of "sinking roots"), life was already "living together," it was made possible by the *others*' acceptance of one's presence into the warmth of their world. When it comes to this higher stage, a soul that really cares for itself and wants to "live in truth" *has* to do whatever is in its power to help its fellow-souls understand what it means to care for the soul. Care of the soul presupposes, in an essential way, precisely this generous openness to the others and an active *care for them.* Moreover, if it is not to betray itself, a self-caring soul has to do so *at any price*. The best example is that of Socrates. Patočka repeatedly praises Socrates for having fully understood what care for the soul really was, and for having been the first philosopher in the Western tradition to put the care for the soul above anything else, including his own life. Socrates constantly "invites people to *think*, that they think like him, that they search, that everyone *responsively* examine their every thought," (Patočka 2002: 85) every belief, every established opinion. He teaches his fellow-Athenians that "an unexamined life is not worth living," even if sometimes this process of examination places the examiner against his very city. In the end, thanks to these teachings, to this active care for the soul, Socrates' "whole *existence*" becomes "a provocation to the city." (Patočka 2002: 87)

On the other had, Patočka argues, by persecuting Socrates, the city of Athens does only what is natural for a "lawless city" to do. In fact, Socrates *invited* them to persecute him; his way of philosophizing has always been an open invitation to persecution. This is one of those cases in which the care for the soul endangers the very individual who practices it: "the care of 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: 87) It is not difficult to see that in passages like these Patočka speaks not only of Socrates and the city of Athens, but also about himself and the Czechoslovakia of his time. As such, by saying that "it is altogether logical" that the city treats the one pursuing care for the soul "accordingly," Patočka sends obliquely a message that he, too, has already prepared himself to die for the sake of a Socratic way of life. With such statements he simply indicates that he has understood what is truly at stake in this whole process. Moreover, he sees his whole mission as belonging somehow to a certain "Socratic heritage" that he feels he has to take care of:

> Socrates leaves a heritage. Socrates did not help himself, but he helps others. 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… To create such a city is the work of his successors. That is the city where Socrates and those like him will not need to die. (Patočka 2002: 88)

As Erazim Kohák plastically puts it, the story of "Patočka's philosophizing, which began with the Socratic question, finds its Socratic conclusion in the interrogation rooms of the police headquarters." (Kohák 1989: 8)

5. Embodying philosophy

There must have been a moment in Patočka's life when he realized that his scholarly articles, his underground lectures and seminars, however bold they might have been in terms of (subversive) content, *were not enough* to make a difference in the real world. He must have realized that, however subtle, profound and authentic, his philosophical speculations could not, by themselves alone, amount to the active (to the point of self-sacrificial) care for the soul that he praised so much in Socrates. Something was still missing, and he was acutely aware of that: "Philosophy reaches a point where it no longer suffices to pose questions and answer them, both with extreme energy; where the philosopher will progress no further unless he manages to make a decision." (Patočka *apud* Kriseová 1993: 108). What was missing was something of the nature of a *test* for his philosophizing. He became increasingly aware that a moment would come when he would "have to put his thinking to the test in action… that he couldn't avoid it or put it off forever, because ultimately this would call his whole philosophy in doubt." (Havel 1990: 135)

This crucial step was taken in 1976 when he decided to get actively involved in the Charter 77 movement. To be sure, when he decided to take this step, he knew exactly what he was doing: he was following in Socrates' footsteps[10]. Drastic persecution was only a matter of time. "When Patočka signed Charter 77, agreed to serve as a spokesperson, and authored documents for it, it was an invitation to Husák's regime to persecute him." (Tucker 2000: 86) His was, above all, a decision of a philosophical nature: Patočka's reasons to join the Charter had nothing to do with politics (even if this step was to have political implications)[11], but they had something essential to do with the type of philosophizing he had been teaching and practicing throughout his life. Had he not done this gesture, he could have never said again that his philosophy worked. If a

[10] "Patočka accepted that the struggle between himself and the Czechoslovakian tyranny would end as Socrates' struggle with Athens did. He accepted that his very practice of care for the soul, of search for the truth, would constitute a provocation and might result in state aggression against care for the soul, against the practice of being human." (Tucker 2000: 53)

[11] "In a case of life-imitating philosophy, Patočka, also like Socrates, eventually came to a collision with the authorities and lost his life in the process. Withdrawing from 'political' life (conventionally understood under authoritarian communism) and devoting himself to philosophical inquiry did not prevent Patočka from taking a political position, one perceived as fundamentally destabilizing to the political order." (Falk 2003: 246)

philosophy cannot do anything to stop barbarity, then it doesn't actually have a right to say anything against it.[12]

As such, Patočka's involvement in the Charter 77 movement is to be seen as a *continuation*, or practical application, or culmination, of statements and principles of his own philosophical theories. As Aviezer Tucker says, "Patočka's metaphysically founded ethical system fully explains his involvement with Charter 77." (Tucker 2000: 43)[13] Just as Socrates *had* to say in the law court what he said in order not to betray the very essence of his philosophizing, so Patočka *had* to get involved in the Charter 77 (and subsequently to pay for this involvement with his own life) in order to prove – to himself, to his disciples, to everybody – that his philosophizing is worth following and listening to. Patočka thus becomes, in Paul Ricoeur's words, "the most Socratic of modern philosophers" (apud Kohak 1989: 132)

In a text that Havel wrote in prison, immediately after Patočka's death (Havel 1992), he vividly remembers the last conversion he had with Patočka. This conversation took place while they were both interrogated by the Police at the Ruzyně Prison. It was during one of the breaks between interrogations. They were spending

> the last break between interrogations in the Ruzyně Prison waiting room for 'interogees' philosophizing. At any moment they could come for any one of us, but that did not matter to the professor; in his impromptu seminar on the history of the notion of human immortality and human responsibility he weighed his words as carefully as if we had unlimited time at our disposal. Not only did I ask questions, I even presented him with some of my own philosophical ideas (a thing quite unthinkable before), and he, it seemed to me, was animated by the fact that he found me more than just a polite listener. (Havel 1992: 213)

What is truly remarkable about this conversation is its striking similarity with Plato's *Phaedo*. In a certain sense, both texts tell essentially the same story: in a prison room, shortly before his death, a philosopher is teaching his disciples, for the last time, about the immortality of the soul, about what life is ultimately about, and about what is really

[12] Fanynka Sokolová, Patočka's daughter, recounts in her memorial volume about Patočka, shortly before his death: "You were not well; you were lying down. You were speaking about the lives of philosophers. […] Then suddenly you said, 'You know, when William of Orange had that Spaniard murdered…, no one said anything. And Spinoza… went and wrote on his door: *Ultimi barbarorum*." (*apud* Kriseová 1993: 130)

[13] See also the considerations that Barbara Falk dedicated to this subject (Falk 2003: 242-246). "Signing the Charter was an extension of what Patočka had always been doing, whether as a student of Husserl, a clerk in the Comenius archive, or as a lecturer of an underground seminar. Like Socrates, his task was to actively 'do' philosophy, not face some forced and false choice between 'politics' and 'philosophy.' The point was not to engage in politics for its own sake, but to logically follow the Socratic dictates of attending to issues of truth and reason in the search for the Good." (Falk 2003: 246)

important. The imminence of death does not affect the two philosophers at all: their talk is just like it used to be, their speech is the same; there is nothing rushed, nervous, in their utterances. They both speak as if they had ahead all the time in the world. And precisely by their serenity they *show* that what they are *saying* about death, dying, life and immortality, is true. In both cases, their teaching is supremely moving and efficient, like never before. Reading *Phaedo* we feel the disciples' *attentiveness* to their master, the silent transformation that is taking place in them. As for Havel, this was the lesson of his life: this "had been the encounter that more than any previous one had evoked in me the desire to see him more often… I finally realized all I still wanted to tell him and all I still wanted to learn from him; and on top of all else, our topic: why, we had been talking about death!" (Havel 1992: 213)

Later in the same text Havel talks about those "people who spend their whole lives thinking about death," and he somehow suggests that there is a sense in which these people could be said to "outwit" death. They are somehow stronger than death itself, because what they have done when they were alive *remains*; what they have done death can not "undo." Within a broader scheme of things, they overcome their own deaths and continue to have enduring effects on other people's lives. After all, Havel says,

> that which has already happened, which once was, cannot be undone, "unconsidered"; it in a certain sense *is* – here – there – somewhere – and no cerebral stroke can change any of it. And it seems to me that those like Professor Patočka, with all they were, thought out, did, somehow keep being – here – there – somewhere – more *urgently* than the many of whom death has nothing to fear, and thus no reason to rush. (Havel 1992: 214)

Havel is right, what these people do death cannot take away: it remains. Death only makes it stronger, more visible, more effective. The death of these people is not an end, but only a beginning. Ironically, the Communist authorities, the secret Police in particular, were the first to feel this effectiveness. They felt it right after Patočka's death, at his funeral. Impressive police forces were sent to flank those people attending Patočka's funeral. By their sheer presence there, the Police recognized that even Patočka's death had a political dimension, and that his dead body had an important civic message attached to it. Smart as they always are, the secret Police realized instantly that their victory over Patočka had been a very precarious one, and that, in a strange way, the dead Patočka was much stronger, more influential, and – for them – more dangerous than an alive Patočka. They had all the power in the world and turned him into a corpse; now, mysteriously, the corpse defeated them. And they did everything in their power to prevent Patočka's posthumous political life: "Police cameras filmed and photographed everybody, even at the graveside. The service was interrupted, and the priest's funeral oration drowned out, by a military helicopter circling overhead and the heavy revving of police motorcycles at a nearby racetrack." (Keane 1999: 253-4) It happens all the time. It had happened the same thing with Jan Palach's corpse: the authorities "ordered the tortured body to be removed from the original grave, cremated, and the urn deposited in a secret location outside Prague, yet people still keep coming to the spot with candles and flowers." (Kantúrnová 1992: 175)

6. They shoot philosophers, don't they?

Socrates and Patočka are only the first and, respectively, the most recent in a long series of philosophers who, in some way or other, paid with their own lives for what they thought: Hypatia, St. Justin the Martyr, Giordano Bruno, Pavel Florensky, and many others. There is always something fascinating about these figures: at some point in their lives they stopped using words for conveying their messages, but used themselves instead, their own bodies, their own flesh. Merleau-Ponty said of the human body that the "use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity." (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 202) These philosophers not only did transcend their bodies, but turned them into most eloquent texts, as it were, into some extension of the body of their written work. They died expressive and violent deaths, which were immediately perceived by the others as the ultimate accomplishment of their work, as a supreme crowning of it[14]. Their deaths were deaths unlike any others because they were extremely plastic gestures, not some annihilating occurrences, but something positive, truly meaningful. Their deaths enriched and conferred a deeper meaning on the lives they lived: "The deaths of Socrates, Lincoln, Patočka, and Rabin are usually interpreted as *sacrifices* for that which gave *meaning* to their lives. It is possible to interpret their act of dying as the ultimate self-consciousness of their meanings that transcend the lives." (Tucker 2000: 57) Most of these figures have, mostly retroactively, become "founders" of various philosophical traditions: their sacrifice functions as a "founding murder," to use René Girard's terminology. Socrates is almost universally venerated as the founder of European philosophical tradition, or at least of a certain facet of it; Bruno as having put the foundations of modern un-prejudiced thought; Patočka as having given birth to a new civic culture in Eastern Europe.

There seems to be a double movement here. On the one hand, communities try to get rid of what bothers them too much, sacrificing one or more of their members for the comfort and mental security of the (many) others. They "produce" these martyrs insofar as they do not tolerate certain ideas, beliefs, or behaviors. On the other hand, as I showed in detail in the cases of Socrates and Patočka, philosophers themselves, for various reasons, come sometimes to a point when they see death as a crowning event of their lives, and as something without which their work would be somehow incomplete, if not utterly compromised. Their death is made to serve as an important argument - *the* argument – in their work. Their death, its spectacular occurrence, not only does become a structural part of their lives, but it adds essential meaning to their work, too.

Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote once a text ("Observations on the Sequence Shot") that is extremely pertinent for the present discussion of the "philosophical death." In this text Pasolini argues that, as long as we are alive, we remain fatally "unexpressed," there is still something important in us that we have no knowledge of – and nobody else does, for

[14] The image of Pasolini's dead "body, displayed as an emblem of his life and work, we if it were itself a 'crowning' work of self-definition, stands in turn as emblematic of how representations of death scenes rechannel and make lives over." (Gordon 2000: 60)

that matter: "Until I die no one can guarantee to really know me, that is, to be able to give a meaning to my action." (Pasolini 1988: 236) Up to the very moment of our death we remain an enigma to everybody – especially to us. Only through death can we have access to the most important key to the very meaning of our lives:

> It is …absolutely necessary to die, *because, as long as we live, we have no meaning*, and the language of our lives… is untranslatable; a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations and meanings without resolution. *Death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives… It is only thanks to death that our life serves us to express ourselves*. (Pasolini 1988: 236-7)[15]

Socrates was never Socrates – Socrates in the fullest sense of the word – until he died. And neither was Patočka Patočka, in the proper sense of the word, before he died. And their mastery comes precisely from the fact that they *knew* that, and they also knew that, in order to become who they were, they had to teach themselves the art of dying.

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[15] In his interesting paper Robert Gordon discusses the death of Pasolini himself in relationship to what Pasolini said about the meaning-giving death. What happened after Pasolini's death in a strange way confirmed what he, while he was alive imagined about his future death. After Pasolini's violent death, "it began a process of mythologization that aspired to create this dead poet as a prophetic vessel of truth, Romantic solitude, and timeless totality of knowledge. The figure of Pasolini was undergoing a Dantesque reduction into meaning, not operated by angels or devils but by public or media appropriation, in this case often quite literally of the image of his crushed body." (Gordon 2000: 60)

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