

Book Review

Martin Ritter, *Into the World: The Movement of Patočka's Phenomenology* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019)

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Phenomenological philosophy is characterized by its inherent openness in both a historic and systematic sense. Rather than a system, it is a perspective or an attitude for a radical approach to philosophizing. As Husserl's own project remained unfinished, its openness for the history of philosophy is obvious. The movement he initiated shows openness of yet another nature. Already his closest direct disciples carried phenomenology further by rethinking the very idea of phenomenology itself. Amongst them without a doubt is also probably the most influential Czech philosopher of the twentieth century, Jan Patočka. His philosophy, based on a radical criticism and rethinking of transcendental phenomenology, is addressed in the book *Into the World: The Movement of Patočka's Phenomenology* by Martin Ritter.

Ritter claims to offer "a complete picture of the developments of Patočka's phenomenology" (3). Yet his endeavour focuses not only on this task as a question of the history of philosophy. Ritter also offers an examination, rethinking and appropriation of Patočka's philosophy for the immediate challenges of contemporary existence.

Into the World consists of two intertwined parts. The first concisely introduces the diachronic logic of Patočka's phenomenology. The second part focuses on the movement of existence that Ritter takes for the core concept of Patočka's asubjective phenomenology, which he reinterprets to suit the requirements of a radical phenomenological analysis of our contemporary situation.

Before—so to speak—diving into the text, let me linger on the surface, as the form of Ritter's book tells a lot about the work he had done. Patočka's philosophy is difficult indeed. Partially for the goals it seeks, partially for its recurrent examination of the same motifs with different accents as well as being scattered in multitude of texts accessible, as a whole, in different languages from which the original language is opened to understanding only to few. Patočka was a master in utilizing all the possibilities that Czech offers to articulate philosophical thoughts. The very language of Patočka's texts is the source of certain levels of ambiguity, difficulties, and even obscurity of his

thinking. One cannot but duly appreciate that Ritter's meticulous and systematic interpretation to a great degree diminishes this predicament, hence offering remarkable clarity to both Patočka's and Ritter's own arguments.

Following Patočka

Ritter starts his summary of Patočka's phenomenology with his dissertation and habilitation, respectively, and then follows different stages of Patočka's phenomenology chronologically up to the late phase of his asubjective phenomenology. From the very beginning of Patočka's thought, Ritter follows his divergence from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as inherently limited and in a way unjust to its own dictum: "back to things themselves." Ritter suggests that Patočka sees the deficiency of the phenomenological method in Husserl's transcendental idealism and the one-sided subjectivism that phenomenology must overcome, because as it may be useful in evidence of how being is conditioned in its appearance, i.e., in epistemology, it is profoundly limited in how the world *is*, with all it consists of, conditioned in itself. Thus, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is weak in answering ontological questions. Ritter follows developments of Patočka's various concepts as well as other crucial philosophical influences in Patočka's attempts to rethink and overcome Husserl's transcendental subjectivism and to ground phenomenology ontologically. Besides the obvious influence of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, he keeps a particular focus on the Hegelian motif of history as well as the self-reflecting and self-realizing motion of Spirit. This Hegelian motif along with the inspiration in Bergson is, in my reading of Ritter's interpretation, particularly important for Patočka's emphasis on life.

Ritter charts Patočka's divergence from Husserl on terms like intersubjectivity characterized as intermeshing monads; time as a general ontological fundament; life as a motion that decentralizes human being from one-sided subjectivity and thus—as a trans-individual center—overcomes subject-object dichotomy; inwardness of living "subject" that, being beyond subject-object differentiation, is a "kind of self-forming practice with world as its field" (36) and thus taking into play nonsubjective elements; the dialectic of spirit that precedes and necessitates the concept of Negative Platonism with its desubjectifying notion of Idea as No-Thing essentially identical with freedom that is the "experience we are" (54); corporeity conditioning being in decentralised situatedness in the midst of the world and of the life as a process where "I" becomes "I" through the encounter with That; and finally the movement of existence as the self-realization of existence that, as Ritter's states, is the crucial concept for achieving asubjective phenomenology.

At the end of part I, Ritter analyzes why Patočka never finished the concept of asubjective phenomenology and why, without a profound reconsideration, it might not have even been finishable. Yet still he sees and demonstrates Patočka's attempt to achieve an asubjective phenomenology as

decisive to making phenomenology as radical of a philosophical attitude as it proposed to be. Transcendental phenomenology was able to assess appearing as such. But to aptly access the ontological question of Being that is responsibly cared for, it is necessary—according to Ritter—to devise a subjective phenomenology or at least to radically desubjectify it. In other words, phenomenology needs to start from the inside and in the middle to appraise how human being and Being in general is conditioned.

The general tendency of Ritter's systematic interpretation of Patočka's phenomenology may be described as understanding Patočka's divergence from Husserl's distanced, reflectively observing transcendental phenomenology towards an existential phenomenology that is grounded not only in ontology, but also in the positive responsibility of the human being to Being as a whole. In this manner Ritter shows how Patočka emancipates his phenomenology from Husserl and Heidegger alike.

Here I am compelled to make a critical observation. Ritter claims that Patočka develops his phenomenology in a critical dialogue with Husserl and Heidegger. And this is indeed true. In the case of Heidegger, Ritter often refers to his texts either when pointing out similarities or differences. However, in the case of Husserl, Ritter refers to him—in his book otherwise filled with discussion with other authors—only in two instances. Once in the first part and once in the second. The reason for this approach is obvious. To confront Patočka with Husserl's own positions would mean falling into a rabbit hole and losing the consistency of Ritter's goal to offer a comprehensive interpretation of developments of Patočka's phenomenology. This—so to speak—siding with Patočka is somewhat problematic but productive in the end. It keeps the book within its stated goal to offer comprehensive insight into Patočka's phenomenology, and it still affords a very easily accessible point of departure for those, who would—and should—be interested in the adequacy of his critique towards Husserl.

Beyond the Method

“As a matter of fact, all the thinkers dealing with Patočka's late phenomenology must not only interpret Patočka but think his concept through independently” (93). With these words at the end of part I, Ritter bridges to the second part in which he carries this out. He starts with the reevaluation of body, corporeity, and embodiment of existence in Patočka's phenomenology. Ritter quite surprisingly calls for a specific reinstalment of a unified body-mind duality. The body is the bearer of the movement of existence and as such it is in the world. The “I” lives through the body but at the very same time, the body conditions the “I” by bestowing life upon it. Existence transcends the body by its acts of life but in this transcendence, it is ontologically torn apart, and in this way the body transcends existence. From this perspective of a body that is both inside the “I” and outside as something given, Ritter reinterprets Patočka's concept of care for the soul.

For Ritter, care for the soul is inseparable from the movement of existence. Contrary to Patočka, Ritter does not emphasize only the third movement as the movement towards freedom that is the sole sphere where people can care for the soul in opposition to earthly bound movements of rootedness and work. For Ritter this sphere is rather the very existence itself as a movement that is autokinetic (self-moving) and autopoietic (self-creating) and is realized in one's unity with oneself through all three movements. As such, existence is always situated within the given world with its given conditions and is fundamentally responsible for its own movement as it is responsibility for itself. It is due to the body's rootedness in the earth that responsibility is a response to the given conditions of life within the unity of the world. Henceforth Ritter can claim in his interpretative development of Patočka's phenomenology that: "The soul consists rather in the very 'taking care'. It is possible only thanks to one's responsivity to the world and it is performed when one assumes responsibility for one's own responsive action, by appropriating it as one's own" (126).

This responsibility is, in Ritter's development of Patočka, primarily an act of self-realization in response to others and otherness. Through encounters with them, the subject emerges as an "I" articulated within the conditions they give to it. How can phenomenology, in Ritter's reinterpretation, make this conditioning visible? The obvious answer is in the intersubjective nature of existence. But, as Ritter clearly demonstrates, even in the first two movements intersubjectivity manifests itself not only in an immediate encounter, but also in the givenness of "institutions," such as family in the first movement and symbolic institutions in the second movement.

For phenomenology to be able to make these conditioning givens visible, and this is the genuine ambition of Ritter's book, it is inevitable to step outside its own realm and adopt, or more precisely fuse with, non-phenomenological approaches. To obtain the notion of these conditionings within which the being self-realizes itself, it is, as Ritter argues, necessary to deepen phenomenology through media philosophy. He demonstrates it by his own specific concept of trans-subjectivity as a complement to intersubjectivity. Phenomenology, Ritter states, primarily considers intersubjectivity as an immediate encounter. It is to be added that at least the radical embrace of this face to face encounter in Levinas' philosophy supports his notion. But (not only) in the contemporary world, as Ritter continues, intersubjective relations are vastly mediated by something nonsubjective, that is, by something that is at the center of the field of media philosophy.

The potency of current (especially German) media philosophy leads Ritter to interpret "three movements [of existence] as three forms of mediality through which a singularly existing human being realizes its being" (134). This medialization of Patočka's philosophy allows Ritter to enrich its scope by cultural techniques conceived as "objective-side" conditions unappreciated by phenomenology. As surprising as it might seem, I find this

plausible, especially when one considers the importance of *techne* or *technê poietike* for all the major inspirational sources of Patočka's late phenomenology—especially for Plato, Aristotle, and Heidegger. This conditioning of existence by cultural techniques is not for Ritter in contradiction with Patočka's focus on freedom as an essence of the human being. Freedom, for Ritter, is not imprisoned by these conditions. Existence is rather mediated and shaped in its *free* movement by itself to itself. Ritter's thinking with Patočka beyond Patočka by fusing the asubjective (tendency of) phenomenology with media philosophy allows him to overcome Patočka's inherent Eurocentrism as well as to adapt his phenomenology to the contemporary world's challenges.

Ritter's book is a remarkable contribution to interpretative studies of Patočka's philosophy. *Into the World* offers a rigorous introduction to the developments of Patočka's phenomenology that is, in Ritter's interpretative enterprise, first and foremost an existential phenomenology. Yet this book offers much more than an introduction. It is an original and intriguing rethinking of Patočka that suggests—and takes—a radically new step in the development of phenomenology toward what could be described as a pathic phenomenology.

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