

Róbert Stojka

Patočka and Socratic knowing of the unknown

Abstract: Socrates as a philosopher is remarkably present in Patočka's thought in all periods of his philosophical life. Patočka accepts the Socratic idea of *knowing the unknown*. He is developing this idea step by step throughout the various periods of his philosophical work. Socratic knowing of the unknown, transformed successively through the *problematization* and the moment of *negativity* into the principle of *historicity*, means for Patočka the essential *resort* to his own concept of *philosophy of history* in its top form. With this concept, he attempts to advance a new, historical understanding of the sense of human life, and also of the sense of history. For Patočka, history is understood as constant problematization; it is *infinite, unresolved and opened* — and it must remain so if we want to avoid the *end of history*.

Keywords: Patočka, Socrates, knowing, history, historicity, philosophy of history

1. Introduction

Socrates takes the central place in Patočka's thinking, especially in relation to his philosophy of history. Socrates' influence in the history of philosophy comes to Patočka's attention in all periods of his philosophical life. It is safe to say that it is Socrates who fundamentally determined Patočka's philosophical direction, and this influence can be seen in Patočka's every major piece of writing dedicated to the reflection on history as well as history of thinking. I. Chvatík notices this influence while comparing Patočka's early and late writ-

ings in relation to his concept of philosophy of history. “At a glance, in 1973, it is almost the same Socrates as it used to be.”¹ The presence of Socrates as a key character in Patočka’s philosophy is also emphasised by M. Palouš: “In interpretations of all the philosophers since the ancient time to the contemporary age ... we find in Patočka one character that can play a key role in the understanding of his own philosophical position: the interpretation of Socrates.”² In one of his first published papers, in 1936, Patočka writes about this Greek philosopher: “The fact that Socrates existed is invaluable for philosophy,”³ because for him Socrates is not just another philosopher; Socrates is the benchmark of philosophy, and his life confirmed that philosophy can stand up to life. This is why he is invaluable even for the contemporary thinking. It was Socrates who proved, by his own life and death, that “it is possible to philosophise, and this is why ages will keep thinking about him.”⁴ These are the reasons that lead Patočka to believing that *without Socrates, it is not possible to philosophise at all*. This understanding of Socrates’ importance is bound to his philosophical activity, out of which his attitude to life and death derives. With his life and death, Socrates managed to invest his philosophical words with truthfulness and meaning. This is why he is perceived by Patočka as *a philosopher in the truest sense of the word*, as a philosopher who not only preached his own philosophy, but who *lived it*.

With regard to Socrates’ life, it is interesting to note that a very similar fate was bestowed upon Patočka during his participation in Czechoslovakian politics. From a philosophical perspective, the most interesting question concerns the essence of this philosophical *Socratic attitude*, which renders one capable of withstanding even the most unfavourable *outer* life circumstances. Perhaps this essence, or rather *axis* around which Patočka’s understanding of the Socratic way of philosophising revolves, is the central concept of *knowing of the unknown*. This way of philosophising is fundamentally based on *the question* that leads step by step to *problematization* as the inevitable element of thinking; and for Patočka, its source is Socrates. The first issue we want to address is *defining the knowing of the un-*

¹ I. CHVATÍK: “Zodpovědnost ‘otřesených.’” In: *Dějinnost, nadcivilizace a modernita*. Studie k Patočkově konceptu nadcivilizace. Eds. J. P. ARNASON, L. BENYOVŠZKY, M. SKOVAJSA. Praha 2010, p. 148.

² M. PALOUŠ: “Filosofovat se Sokratem.” *Filosofický časopis* 1—2 (1990), p. 47.

³ J. PATOČKA: “Kapitoly ze současné filosofie.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši I*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 1. Praha 1996, p. 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*

known, the fundamental element of Socratic thinking, as understood and reflected by Patočka.

For Patočka, the above mentioned problematisation is inextricably linked with the principle of *historicity*, the most fundamental and irreplaceable principle of his interpretation of history. A follow-up question is then how Socratic knowing of the unknown reflects into Patočka's own conception of historicity, into the *central place* of his conception of philosophy of history throughout the various periods of his philosophical work.

2. Socrates' own *discovery*

Patočka's first unsupported paper, and the largest in scope where he talks about Socrates, is a lecture course from the academic year of 1946—1947.⁵ In the beginning of his lectures, Patočka draws attention to the fact that “one of the central characters in the spiritual history stands in front of us, as it were, with bare hands, without objective doctrine, ... but with immense claim that philosophy should not be concerned with thinking of the world ... but with *thinking of the man*, thinking that does not take the man as a subject, but thinking that is inseparable from action, thinking that is not a mirror of everything, but just a piece of self-forming, self-creating life.”⁶ For Patočka, misunderstanding of this central point is the main source of misconstruction, relentless attacks and misinterpretations in relation to Socrates. At the same time, Patočka introduces this character in the history of philosophy as a *philosophical problem*, which is “Socrates as a fate, a life that was not yet judged.”⁷ Patočka interprets this problem with extraordinary soundness and assiduousness.

Patočka's interpretation of the *Socratic problem* is based on the idea of knowing the unknown, through which he proceeds to interpreting other topics — education, problematisation, care for the soul, irony and even search for virtues (*areté*). Patočka analyses Socratic knowing of the unknown in different contexts.

⁵ J. Patočka: *Sókratés*. Přednášky z antické filosofie. Praha 1990.

⁶ J. Patočka: *Sókratés*, p. 26.

⁷ Ibid.

For Socrates, one of the prerequisites for knowing the unknown is a *question*, question about what is *good*, question that is, for Patočka, Socrates' *own discovery*. With this question, Socrates addresses his contemporaries, who are *morally unawakened*. Patočka himself evaluates this moment from the following perspective: "It is awakening to the question that is (the most) important for Socrates, not the solution."⁸ His question is crucial and "it is not merely a means of making the one we speak to more docile, of humiliating and fooling them only to serve them our own wisdom."⁹ What is the most important to understand is that Socrates does not offer any *answers* to his questions; on the contrary, "the process of asking must be permanent and relentless."¹⁰

Patočka then problematises this attitude as a philosophical *way* that, on the one hand, nowhere and never ends, and on the other hand, might turn into one's *life schedule*: "On the basis of this ignorance of the final goal, which is revealed in constant questioning and testing, there emerges (then) the possibility of *true life*, uniformed and concentrated."¹¹ In Patočka's understanding of *Socrates' challenge to take care of the soul*, this manifests itself as man's life schedule based on knowing of the unknown: "Knowing of good which is peculiar to man is in its truest form, in form of knowing, gnosis, *knowing of the unknown*."¹²

On the other hand, Patočka reminds us that this is one of the key moments in the philosophy of Socrates, "around which, for Socrates, everything gravitates and which has, ever since Aristotle, been misunderstood."¹³ It is not just *intellectual knowing* (of the unknown), but it is all about understanding that it is "the basic movement or turnover of our entire human existence, the most fundamental, conscious being."¹⁴ It consists in *detecting errors* with the help of constant problematisation, which in this understanding is "odd combination of positive and negative; the latest aim is put in today's perspective of rejecting all natural and immediate (objectives)."¹⁵ He comments on this problem elsewhere in a very similar way: all given and relative objectives of life are "rejected if their entitlement to this relativity

⁸ Ibid., p. 99.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 115—116.

¹² Ibid., p. 117.

¹³ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

goes beyond their limits; they're rejected because they have a natural inclination to be given as objectives absolute, truthful, clear."¹⁶

In this regard, Patočka refers to knowing of the unknown as a *Socratic paradox* — this attitude is essentially paradox-like, because it “entails the ignorance of the Objective (the Objective as used here expresses the total, final objective or meaning), the meaning of life, and *at the same time* the passionate and unwavering accession to this Objective, to this meaning.”¹⁷ The Socratic paradox lies in our *knowing* that we *know nothing* about the finite, ultimate meaning, and despite that we accept it as *the meaning* of life, however problematic it might be. For Patočka, as we will see later, there appears here an indispensable and irreplaceable moment of negativity, which will prove very important in relation to his late thinking.

From this understanding of the care for the soul based on knowing the unknown, Patočka derives its goal as well. This goal is supposed to be achieving Socratic virtues — *areté*. Following this, the goal is “human ἀρετή, the one Socrates is looking for, ἀρετή of our soul ... (because) the soul is what makes our life's meaning complete.”¹⁸ Our soul has an option to choose, to decide between the path of achieving ἀρετή in a way that it “decides not only to serve mere life, but to let life serve something else and single-like, and so it leaves it to constantly remain with the only essential one, with what is good intrinsically, in itself. And even though we do not know what this positive value is, this ἀγαθόν may be an effort to form one's entire life by rejecting everything that is just secondary, while focusing on what is important, what is primary.”¹⁹ A person who is taking care of the soul in this way may achieve *areté*, and this achievement, Patočka believes, will fundamentally reflect on their life — as they still have in mind this infinite objective which leads to *searching for fullness of life*. Such a person will necessarily be capable of *self-control*, and this self-control projects in their life as “an ability to control the entirety of one's own being, inseparable from life nearby the final objective.”²⁰

This final objective he repeatedly returns to, about which he *knows*, is not knowing, in the sense of not giving any positive or

¹⁶ J. PATOČKA: “Remarques sur le problème de Socrate.” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 4—6 (1949), p. 209. In this study, Patočka responds to several interpretations of Socratic philosophy. It also thematically tallies with his Prague lectures on Socrates.

¹⁷ J. PATOČKA: “Remarques sur le problème de Socrate,” p. 209.

¹⁸ J. PATOČKA: *Sókratés*, p. 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

definitive answer to the question. One of the means or methods Socrates uses to express this knowing of the unknown is, according to Patočka, *irony*. It is an ongoing journey and need for a constant *new inquiry*. Socratic irony is a major element and it has its basis in knowing that “real meaning is different from what it may appear, and consists in turnovers of this meaning.”²¹ In this way, Socratic irony becomes *educational, pedagogical force*, which is supposed to show that human life is all about something *else* than it may appear to those who think that they have *found definitive answers*. For Patočka, it is this moment in Socratic irony that makes Socrates “more grown-up than grownups.”²²

Patočka develops his thoughts on Socrates in a very similar manner in another lecture on Plato from the same period, in which he sees these two greats of Greek philosophy as closely entwined with each other. Socrates is the one who “brought the key to all inconveniences and way out of all helplessness”²³ to Plato. Even here he presents Socrates as the first who “realised his wisdom: knowing of the unknown, of the important, fine and positively defined objective, knowing that ἀρετή is not given to man.”²⁴ In relation to his influence on Plato, Patočka focuses on Socratic *negative knowing*, that is on *provoking* other members of the polis. This is related to Socrates’ own fate of getting into *conflict* with the polis; Patočka often reminds that this moment was critical and that it shaped Plato and his philosophy in a fundamental way. Socrates’ problematisation of his approach as the *one and only* true, non-obscuring way of philosophising induces *resistance* in society. To this Patočka says: “there is something primordial and natural that rises in defence against the awareness that the truest human life, the truest being of a man is not present, is not given, is not here.”²⁵ The Socratic attempt to philosophically *break through* this defence may lead to a reaction that is perceived as *offence*, which is a necessary means “of defending the inner falsehood.”²⁶ So the philosopher falls into disfavour for *provoking* the polis, and a conflict arises, but Socrates cannot retreat, he must keep “the order of his inner freedom, mainly freedom from internal falsities, from self-deception in human life.”²⁷ Socrates’ wisdom

²¹ Ibid., p. 125.

²² Ibid.

²³ J. PATOČKA: *Platón. Přednášky z antické filosofie*. Praha 1992, p. 30.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

based on morality is then “wisdom in the face of death, it is a victory over fear; such human wisdom is also bravery.”²⁸ Therefore, in this conflict between the philosopher and the polis, the *apparent* winner is the polis, but the *real* winner is the philosopher — Socrates.

This moment impresses Plato deeply and influences his philosophy in the same way as Patočka demonstrates later in his other papers. These are, so to speak, the *ethical* implications of Socratic knowing of the unknown, which are reflected in how a *philosopher* can, or how he should, approach life. It is not the only aspect in which the impact of this idea is important. From this perspective, it is possible to discern in the Socratic approach, but also in Patočka’s approach to Socrates, *two basic levels*: on the one hand, there is the *level of ethics*, concentrated on the issue of human good and the principle of care for the soul, and on the other hand, there is the *negatively-metaphysical level*, which is reflected in knowing the unknown. Both levels, virtually inseparable, overlap and affect each other. Both levels pervade substantially Patočka’s philosophy as a whole, and therein are essentially constant and somehow present in each period of his philosophical work.²⁹

For Patočka, the negatively-metaphysical level is equally interesting, inspiring and determining as the ethical level, which significantly affects mainly his philosophy of history. Patočka turns to this level at the end of his lecture on Socrates and he continues with this topic in subsequent periods of his work. There he defines the human as: “a being with a question mark,”³⁰ which means that man, in his essence, is not given in any way, he is not a *definitive* being, he is not complete. This means that “his essence is, in contrast to other things, something historical.”³¹ Here we find a moment that Patočka *returns to* in his thinking, a moment which he develops in other stages of his work, namely, the claim that “Socrates discovered the historical concept of man, even though it may seem paradoxical in his un-historical period ... and on the threshold of that radical eternalism represented by names of Plato — Aristotle.”³² It is so

²⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁹ Patočka returns to this *conflict* mainly in his writings from the 1970s in the context of the problem of the care of the soul. See J. PATOČKA: “Platón a Evropa.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši II*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 2. Praha 1999, pp. 241–242, 246–249; J. PATOČKA: “Evropa a doba poevropská.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši II*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 2. Praha 1999, pp. 133–134; J. PATOČKA: *Platónova péče o duši a spravedlivý stát*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 14/4. Praha 2012, pp. 24–25.

³⁰ J. PATOČKA: *Sókratés*, p. 144.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

precisely because the beginning and end of the whole process *is still unknowing*. Later, he continues advancing this fundamental idea of human *historicity* — in his treatises *Věčnost a dějinnost* [Eternity and historicity] — where he writes almost in the same vein: “Socrates discovered man as a being different from everything else — a human being originally incomplete, but given to their own hands ... For such a being, life events must have a significant meaning; a being, for which the act of happening has a meaning, this being is historical. Socrates is the discoverer of human historicalness.”³³

Patočka combines Socratic knowing of the unknown with the question that stands at the basis of the need of constant *problematization*, which presupposes the possibility of *transcendence*. In this sense, knowing of the unknown is then “knowing about what is not the truest being, what — being given like passion, instinct, routine, or custom — is not positive. In all this, there is *transcensus* associated with Socrates’ question. In all this, the first philosopher is Socrates.”³⁴ That is why Patočka interprets the character of Socrates as *the first philosopher of human historicity*. And this is also an important moment, which significantly affects Patočka’s philosophy until the end of his philosophical life. Starting with Socratic knowing of the unknown, Patočka interprets and develops this principle further to his *own conception of historicity*, which is an essential (and nothing but indispensable) building block for his philosophy of history.

3. Knowing of the unknown and history of philosophy

In what way is Socratic knowing of the unknown reflecting into Patočka’s conception of historicity and so into the *centre* of his conception of history of philosophy? As mentioned above, the idea of knowing of the unknown is in Patočka’s interpretation of Socrates inseparably bound to the question that Socrates alone does not answer, the question that is later interpreted by the Czech philosopher as the need of constant problematisation. This moment is later formulated (in the 1950s) by Patočka as a *negative principle*.

³³ J. PATOČKA: *Věčnost a dějinnost*. Praha 2007, p. 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

It is this moment of negativity as *a constant possibility*, respectively as *unfillness*, *unfinishedness* and *unsecretiveness*, that is becoming a clear and necessary condition for capturing human historicity. Based on this *historical interpretation*, Patočka is trying to formulate his own philosophical position, from which he then criticises almost every single important and essential philosophical concept. He calls his position, under the influence of Heidegger's thinking, *non-metaphysical philosophy*, or *negative Platonism*. In relation to the traditional understanding of *metaphysical philosophy*, Patočka criticises the fact that in this philosophy "there is an attempt to put the shakiness into the robust framework that concludes itself."³⁵

The same spirit pervades Patočka's writings from the beginning of the 1950s, when he attempts to create this own concept — this concerns mainly the two most compact (and the most known of that time period) works: *Věčnost a dějinnost* [Eternity and historicity] and "Negativní platonismus" [Negative Platonism]. Here, Patočka departs significantly from his earlier views and, in a sense, juxtaposes Socrates and Plato as the representatives of two fundamentally *different* and even *contradictory* principles: first, *historicity*, represented by Socrates, and second, *eternity*, represented by Plato. Socrates, however, is for Patočka so important a figure that he attempts, especially in his late interpretation of Plato, a *re-socratisation*³⁶ of Plato. For Patočka, in his writings mentioned above, Plato is a philosopher who "brought the first delineation of the positive (rationalist) metaphysics."³⁷ So he influenced the development of metaphysics through the Western thought. Plato tried *affirmatively* or *positively* to provide the *final* answer to the Socratic question. According to Patočka, he gave again "a positive direction to the Socratic Care for the Soul, to Socrates' moral turnover, which was initially averted and thus had a negative base, negative meaning."³⁸ With its *positivity*, however, the Platonic world of ideas is losing its *vibrancy* for Patočka, its *unfinishedness*, at the same time losing its *historicity*. Patočka rejects this ideal word, because he rejects — not only in

³⁵ J. PATOČKA: "Nemetafyzická filosofie a věda." In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 3. Praha 2002, p. 611.

³⁶ This problem has recently been analysed by M. Cajthaml and P. Jíra. See M. CAJTHAML: *Evropa a péče o duši*. Praha 2010, pp. 66—70, 80—87; P. JÍRA: "Patočkovy rozlišení mezi Sókratem a Platónem." *Filosofický časopis* 4 (2010), pp. 485—499.

³⁷ J. PATOČKA: "Negativní platonismus." In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši I*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 1. Praha 1996, p. 324.

³⁸ J. PATOČKA: *Věčnost a dějinnost*, p. 30.

relation to Plato, but in relation to other philosophers as well — attempts to *absolutise* anything in terms of absolute perfection, positiveness and therefore *finishedness*.

Therefore, the Socratic path of historicity is far more viable for Patočka. It is the fact that Socrates was approaching philosophy through knowing of the unknown that ultimately leads to the historicity of man, so he never set foot into metaphysics as such. Patočka believes that a whole *new level* for Socratic thinking opens here, a level where formulated questions offer different *options* for different answers. As Patočka would say, it consists in “negation of all final theses.”³⁹ And this is why he calls his concept (he later leaves it behind in this exact form) *a negative* (that is, in a sense, inverted) *Platonism*. From this position, he criticises the entire metaphysics founded by Plato, Aristotle and others, because its essence lies in the fact that “to the Socratic question, an answer is given, an answer that the philosopher seeks to draw from the questions alone ... but this new knowing is supposed to have a subject, content and it is positive.”⁴⁰

The interpretation of *the human* experience of the world as an experience of *historical beings* is to Patočka “something radically different from metaphysics.”⁴¹ Based on the principle of *negativity*, he defines the essence of the human being as a historical being: “This essence is not ... an essence of positive, finished content; what is essential is unfinished, blank, or even negative, and still this negativity has a positive meaning, this resistance is the lively and essential asset.”⁴²

Patočka introduces the idea of negativity, blankness, unfinishedness and, therefore, *openness* to the *overall* philosophical view of human history — just as much as the principle of historicity — and this concept becomes one of the main ideas in his philosophy of history. It is safe to say that he does not abandon it until the end of his philosophical career. In relation to history, he states that from this point of view, “it seems impossible to even talk about the end of history and about the completion of the historical process.”⁴³

The principle of historicity is thus fully reflected in the philosophical interpretations of human history in the context of his concept of philosophy of history (from the early 1970s until his death),

³⁹ J. PATOČKA: “Negativní platonismus,” p. 309.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ J. PATOČKA: “Negativní platonismus,” p. 326.

⁴² J. PATOČKA: *Večnost a dějinnost*, p. 113.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 116.

which plays a vital role. Here, this principle is inextricably linked with the idea of caring of the soul, believed to be Socrates', but fully developed by Plato, thus illustrating the above mentioned problem of re-socratisation of Plato. In Patočka's lecture cycle on Plato (winter and summer semester of the academic year 1971—1972), Socrates is interpreted as the one who gave (not only to Plato) "a tremendous example of the philosophical life."⁴⁴ Especially for this reason, he is a person who "identifies his life with philosophy,"⁴⁵ and therefore does not hesitate to die for his own views and opinions. As we have mentioned above, according to Patočka, his conflict with the polis substantially determines the entire philosophy of Plato: "Socrates — what a great theme of Plato's meditation."⁴⁶ Elsewhere, Patočka says: "Socrates is for Plato almost a constant subject of thinking and continual objective reflection."⁴⁷

Let us return to the principle of historicity in connection with the figure of Socrates, which is of particular interest to us, and which is significantly developed by Patočka during this period. Patočka interprets historicity through the care for the soul, which is precisely the Socratic *call for reflection* as a continuous examination and problematisation that allows us to reach a philosophical *insight*. In this sense, all thinkers believe that "human questioning and reasoning bring man into the centre of being in its integrity, to the eternal and divine."⁴⁸ For Patočka, there is no *eternal* and *divine* centre; therefore, it is only possible to reach the essential *indirectly* — through knowing of the unknown — that is, on the condition that "a person on the path of questioning and reasoning does not allow him or herself to be pushed away, while at the same time every result is again a subject to problematisation."⁴⁹ It is therefore a requirement that one should "continue to repeat the task,"⁵⁰ and only if this condition is fulfilled "does one take a new approach to the truth."⁵¹

At this point, it is important to note that it is the entire relationship of understanding and caring for the soul that lies at the *centre of philosophy* for Patočka: "We are not caring for the soul to reach the last reasons and to dip into the first causes ... but we under-

⁴⁴ J. Patočka: *Platónova péče o duši a spravedlivý stát*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ J. Patočka: "Platón a Evropa," p. 225.

⁴⁸ J. Patočka: "Evropa a doba poevropská," p. 125.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

stand because we take care of the soul.”⁵² This care for the soul, originally based on knowing of the unknown, is happening thanks to *questioning thought* that has a form of dialogue, but it can — and here a palpable presence of Platonic ideas becomes manifest — run inside the soul itself. The most important is the “willingness to problematise your own opinion at any time; in the willingness to examine, a certainty is included that there is no end.”⁵³ This experience that one can always problematise one’s views and opinions, that one can put into doubt even what seems obvious, is in this view “replaced by a requirement that this *must* be done.”⁵⁴

For a person who is truly philosophising, a new position emerges; a position of a permanent inquiry. This paradoxical attitude — here Patočka reiterates the idea of Socratic paradox — provides the seeker with a special stability: “an eternal seeker is armoured against conflict and its mental repercussions.”⁵⁵ For Patočka, this is the only acceptable, historical attitude, which he expresses as *ἐποχή* which is extremely positive.⁵⁶ He does not understand *ἐποχή* as refraining from judgment, but as an insight which in this case means “hypothetical pre-deployment of referring that is exposed, in all loyalty and willingness, to more and more research.”⁵⁷

In this way, according to Patočka, an environment for a mental movement is being formed, an environment that philosophy before Socrates did not know, called *investigating λόγος*. It implies, on the one hand, “eternal movement, and its final objective is the human being, just in the sense of having it on one’s mind, always remaining with it”;⁵⁸ at the same time, however, we should never be proud of the fact that “we managed to achieve it any other way than in the form of a path.”⁵⁹ On the other hand, “it *is* present in the seeking soul in the form of a spark which kindles the light that nourishes itself alone, being ever clearer with further investigation — the further one reaches, the more one illuminates.”⁶⁰ A person taking care of the soul *knows* that they will not reach *the end* of the path of knowledge, the eternal, ultimate and *definitive* conclusions. What

⁵² Ibid., p. 126.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 127.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ J. PATOČKA: “Platón a Evropa,” p. 230.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ J. PATOČKA: “Evropa a doba poevropská,” p. 127.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

they can reach are *reasons*, *foundations*, or *beginnings* of the path: “The road leads first to the basics, beginnings, sources. As the road is firm, it is possible to keep walking along it again and again, it can be explored.” While it is quite possible — and this belongs to the problematisation — that we will have to retake this path of knowing from the beginning, each partial knowledge must eventually be replaced by just *another*, different knowledge, so from this point of view, it is clear for Patočka that in spite of everything, “clarity must finally arise.”⁶¹

It is crucial that the soul focused on what is essential gradually gains a *strong* and *clear form*, “it knows what it means and what kind of thoughts are those it works with, what their structure is; and it knows this despite never giving away and never forgetting its original experience, aporia, embarrassment, unknowing, but it made it a constant predictor of the path alone.”⁶²

In this way, such a soul, taking care of itself, created by itself, *recognises itself* in knowing of the unknown and experiences its Being: “it is brave at self-problematisation, wise in knowing of the unknown as inquiring, restrained and disciplined, because it subordinates all other life’s circumstances to its thought action, just because it does what it deserves, what is bound to it, just its own duty, it does not preen.”⁶³ In this understanding of knowing of the unknown, we have “a measure for its own Being, which the soul gave itself in this way: its unity, permanence, precision.”⁶⁴ The original Socratic idea of care for the soul interpreted by Patočka manifests itself as a philosophical insight that this is what *makes history a history*.

4. The principle of historicity and philosophy of history

Here we come to the last point, to the question of the relationship between Patočka’s principle of historicity and his concept of philosophy of history in its most developed form. Patočka wonders whether it is possible at all to reveal some ultimate, timeless, or eternal *sense*

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 128.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

of history in such a way so that it does not mean *the end of history*. Is not *historicity*, as a *constant challenge* to the human being, the essence of human history? It is the human being that must bear and act their own Being, and this is the human condition, human historicity; consequently, human history is a journey, a *journey that never ends*, and to which problematisation inseparably belongs.

Ever since the time of Socrates, such an *open thinking* has been part of philosophy itself, and perhaps this is the place where we can find a foothold to *connect* philosophy and history. Where else could this be implemented, if not in *philosophical thinking of history* — in the philosophy of history? Perhaps this is the issue Patočka has in mind when in the beginning of his philosophical career he writes: “only historical philosophy can lead to a genuine philosophy of history.”⁶⁵ For him, historical philosophy is philosophy that “leads to capturing the essence of historicity, not to misrepresenting it.”⁶⁶ This is the philosophy he sought throughout his life, and perhaps because of this, his philosophical effort culminates in an original concept of philosophy of history.

According to Patočka, the historicity of the human being, besides the continuous problematisation, embraces also the constant *moulding* of sense as a fight, as caretaking. And in this fight, human freedom is an option that might, or might not be followed. Freedom brings a choice between two ways of (spiritual) life. The passive way consists in looking for sense coming from the outside, in waiting to be given some meaning to one’s life. For Patočka, it is typical of humans in the pre-historic period, who receive meaning of life from the outside — from myth. They do not realise that they could reach freedom, and that is why they do not have it yet.

In contrast to this, there is the active way of life, which for Patočka begins with the development of human history. It is here where the human being realises freedom, and so they obtain it. It is not only a possibility, but also a necessity based in the historicity of man — to constantly struggle to gain meaning. In this view, the human being “has taken over his or her Being and now is responsible for it in such a way that he or she chooses one of the options ... the human being is the one who carries and acts his or her Being.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere, in the context of the historicity of man, Patočka also very

⁶⁵ J. PATOČKA: “Několik poznámek k pojmu ‘světových dějin.’” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši I*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 1. Praha 1996, p. 55.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ J. PATOČKA: “Problém počátku a místa dějin.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 3. Praha 2002, pp. 286—287.

clearly states: “A free life is inevitably a struggle.”⁶⁸ It is important to understand that Patočka does not perceive meaning as something pre-existing, eternal, or ideal, but as something constantly renewing and transforming, because it is Socratic shaking out, which means “a leap into a new meaning which is realised in the clarity of the problematic situation.”⁶⁹

However, Patočka applies the problem of meaning not only to the human being as an individual, but also to the history of humanity as a whole — as a problem of determining the meaning of history. He develops this issue in several different places. Perhaps the most famous of his texts in relation to this problem is an essay “Does history have a meaning?” published in “Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin” [Heretical essays in the philosophy of history], but the question of the meaning of history takes a privileged position also in other writings of the late period. In relation to the meaning of history as he understands it — on the basis of problematisation, necessary for the historicity of the period — Patočka says: “There is no uniform world history of mankind, and there is no single uniform meaning of history.”⁷⁰ Elsewhere he rejects all eschatological tendencies in philosophical interpretations of human history, because according to him, “it is in the ‘nature’ of history not knowing anything definitive and not being able to prove anything in the future.”⁷¹ This openness in his understanding of history rests right on the Socratic understanding of the need of constant problematisation that guarantees the only truly historical understanding of human history. This approach is reflected in Patočka’s meaning of history in “Kacířské eseje...” [Heretical essays...], where the whole problem is discussed in a very focused form. Here again he returns to the character of Socrates in determining the historically perceived meaning of the individual human life and, consequently, the meaning of human history as such: “The human being cannot live without meaning and without the total and absolute meaning ... But does it mean they cannot live with a meaning that is looked for and problematic? ... Perhaps Socrates knew about it; it is precisely for this reason that, as a contemporary

⁶⁸ J. Patočka: “Přirozený svět a fenomenologie.” In: J. Patočka: *Fenomenologické spisy II*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 7. Praha 2009, p. 230.

⁶⁹ J. Patočka: “Vlastní glosy ke ‘Kacířským esejům.’” In: J. Patočka: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 3. Praha 2002, p. 134.

⁷⁰ J. Patočka: “Poznámky k ‘době poevropské.’” In: J. Patočka: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 3. Praha 2002, p. 778.

⁷¹ J. Patočka: “Schéma dějin.” In: J. Patočka: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 3. Praha 2002, p. 265.

thinker, Socrates is the truest, though perhaps not the greatest, so aptly profound.”⁷² That is why in this context, “discovering of meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence ... is the meaning of Socrates’ existence.”⁷³

Socrates’ knowing of the unknown, transformed through problematisation and inevitable moment of negativity into the principle of historicity, offers for Patočka a fundamental basis for understanding the meaning of human life and the meaning of history: “The constant shakiness of the naive awareness of meaningfulness is the new way of meaning, finding its connection to the mysteriousness of Being and being whole.”⁷⁴ This understanding, according to Patočka, “is the genesis of a perspective on an absolute meaning to which, however, humans are not marginal, on condition that humans are prepared to give up the hope of a directly given meaning and to accept meaning as a way.”⁷⁵ Thus, the understanding of meaning which Patočka emphasises as important is “valid not only for the individual life, but for the actual history.”⁷⁶ According to Patočka, history is then understood as “nothing other than shaken certainty of the given meaning. It does not have a different meaning or purpose.”⁷⁷

It is indeed clearly visible that Socrates is, in some way, constantly present in Patočka’s philosophical thinking — at least in relation to the problems of the philosophy of history — latent and thus significantly affecting his understanding of the philosophical issues he considered important. Based on the original Socratic knowing of the unknown — gradually philosophically developed by Patočka through the principle of negativity — his late conception of the philosophy of history demonstrates understanding of the historicity of human existence and its problematisation, and the resulting need, or inevitableness, to make sure that our spirituality is not suppressed by something else, so that we should never, at any time, lose sight of our journey and our historical situation, so that we can continue to take care of the soul. We may say, with Patočka, that the present suffers because of the missing solution to the whole problem of history. Yet Patočka also points out (again, in the Socratic spirit) that

⁷² J. PATOČKA: “Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin.” In: J. PATOČKA: *Péče o duši III*. Sebrané spisy. Sv. 3. Praha 2002, p. 80.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 69.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 82—83.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 115.

the problem of history “cannot be solved, but it must remain a problem.” To solve the problem of history would mean to eternise our future, and that would mark the real end of history.

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Róbert Stojka, PhD, is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and History of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, of the University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice. His philosophical research is related to the philosophy of history and the issues of current post-metaphysical situation. He is interested in the problem of history and post-European period, which was the focus of Patočka's philosophy of history. He works on the themes involving Patočka's asubjective phenomenology in the context of his philosophy of history. His main research interests involve the current situation of the philosophy of history and its influence on present philosophy. His recent publications include a monograph *Patočkova filozofia dejín* (Patočka's philosophy of history, Košice 2015) and several articles, such as “Patočkova kritika Heideggera a tri pohyby existencie” (Patočka's critique of Heidegger and three motions of existence, in *Patočka a filozofia 20. storočia*, Košice 2015) and “Patočka, Masaryk a kríza moderného človeka” (Patočka, Masaryk and crisis of modern man, in *Patočka a filozofia 20. storočia*, Košice: 2015).