The following chapter analyzes Jan Patočka’s concept of “asubjective phenomenology”. It begins with Patočka’s criticism of the Husserlian “life-world”, a criticism which leads to Patočka’s concept of the “phenomenal field” as the original source of manifestation, that which is irreducible both to a singular being and to a transcendental subject (in the Husserlian sense). After retracing the Husserlian roots of Patočka’s conception of phenomenality, the text examines human existence as the agent of asubjective phenomenology, ontologically characterized by a unitary, ‘melodic’ movement. This unitary, ‘melodic’ movement, I will show, is triggered and nurtured, in turn, by the original requirement to fulfill the needs of the naked body in which ‘existence’ itself is incarnated. Attending to existence’s movement and its vital origin permits a more in-depth comprehension of the nature of the phenomenal field and allows us to rethink, with Patočka, Husserl’s “life-world” in terms of the “natural world”.

53.1. The crisis of the Lebenswelt: the Husserlian roots of asubjective phenomenology

The core of Jan Patočka’s theoretical thought can be found in the idea of “asubjective phenomenology.” The concept of “asubjective phenomenology” courses throughout his phenomenological work, most prominently during the mature period of Patočka’s thinking, between the second half of the sixties and the second part of the seventies.

The theoretical operation which leads Patočka to the thematization of “asubjective phenomenology” consists of a criticism of the Husserlian foundation of the Lebenswelt in transcendental consciousness. At the beginning of the essay La philosophie de la crise des sciences d’après E. Husserl et sa conception d’une phénoménologie du monde de la vie, Patočka, following in Husserl’s footsteps, emphasizes the paradox of modernity. The universalization of European techno-scientific rationality has led Europe to collapse, to the loss of itself as the “special, even privileged” role of the leader for humanity. The analysis described by Husserl in the Crisis of the European Sciences is, for Patočka, the key reference point for every attempt to reply to this catastrophe of reason and for understanding its very motives.

Nevertheless, according to Patočka, the Husserlian elaboration of the “life-world” shows itself to be afflicted by a basic error which compromises its very starting point, making it party to the oblivion of the “life-world”. In Patočka’s view, the hint of complicity between Husserl and the
techno-scientific removal of the pre-categorical world is to be found in the transcendental status assigned to the ‘life-world’ by Husserl himself.

What Husserl denounces about our artificially constructed world is not thought, functioning even in the realm of the given, but rather thought rendered wholly autonomous, which, in place of finding its intuitive fulfillment in experience, makes itself wholly independent of it and ultimately seeks to replace it […]

(Patočka 1972, 231)

By founding the “life-world” in the constitutive activity of transcendental intentionality, Husserl, according to Patočka, effectively reiterates the modern scientific claim to truly penetrate tangible reality by removing each sign of its irreducibility. This is to say, the “life-world” that has already been objectified by techno-science is yet again reduced to a mere object by the constitutive gaze of transcendental consciousness. The ‘life-world’ consists of contents that are independent in their correlation to an embodied consciousness. But when set before the absolute regard of the ego, these contents inevitably lose their independence. In Patočka’s view, Husserl only attains the ground of a secondary world, while failing to account for the world itself in its primeval and obscure nature, i.e. the world of doxa. Because the Husserlian “life-world” is conceived of as that which can show itself in the flesh before the ego, its inobjectivity is violated and it is reduced to an innocuous presence.

In order to dissolve the aporia Patočka detects in the “life-world”, he suggests a project working towards the ‘universalization of the ‘epoché’. According to such a universalization, the epoché itself would expand its operational range to encompass, as a consequence, the immediateness of the inner experience of the ego. This operation results in what Patočka conceives of as the authentic transcendental, that a priori by virtue of which an ego can appear: the “world”.

Through the ‘universal expansion’ of the epoché, Patočka comes to a ‘world’ which, showing the unmistakable mark of the Finkian concept of “world”, stands out as the condition of the manifestation of each existing being. To be more precise, the world is a horizon that, proceeding and including the inner horizons of each body, allows for the appearance of that which exists. It is, in other words, the “horizon of the horizons”.

As the “horizon of the horizons” is gained by the suspension of the transcendental conscience, it must impose itself as an asubjective “phenomenal field”. This, as such, makes possible both the appearance of the being and of the subject to which the being appears.

Free from every type of ontic or egologic conditioning, Patočka phenomenality shows itself to be “appearing-as-such”, i.e. as a source of manifestation that reveals itself directly, without any type of ontic, conscious metaphorization, or intermediation. At first sight, one might see such a mode of thinking as a direct overturning of Husserlian phenomenology. However, Patočka himself detects the early seeds of this movement of a-subjectification in the definition of the phenomenological I proposed by Husserl in the Logical Investigations.

The real discovery of the Logical Investigations is the field of appearing which must overcome the thing and its material structure, in order for the thing itself to be able to present itself and appear, a field which hides in itself a legality (Gesetzmässigkeit) sui generis, which is not convertible into that of the object in its being or in that of the mental being with its specifically egological character.

(Patočka 1991, 175)

Undoubtedly, here the object appears only as intended by the intentional acts of that phenomenological ego resulting from the suspension of the empirical ego. Nevertheless, what Husserl
implies as a phenomenological phenomenon here is not an autonomous, absolute pole capable of uniting the multiplicity of conscious experiences or dispose of them. Rather, it can only announce itself in the convergence of those experiences.

He is interested in the notion of intentional acts, and of the corresponding objective reality, insofar it seems to allow him to avoid, provided that some precautions are taken, the confusion of subjective and objective, which is very common in the psychology of that period influenced by Empiricism. His aim, when he speaks about lived experiences and their intentional feature, is not something subjective in an egological sense. When he writes the Logical Investigations, Husserl does not acknowledge the existence of a pure ego (Patočka 1991, 175–176).

If Husserl does not here posit any pure ego as the foundation of the flux of intentional experiences, then the source of manifestation that he discovers could be only thought of, to the full, as a sphere which is irreducible to the subjective regard.

### 53.2. Embodied existence

In attributing a subjective character to phenomenality, one should give the term “subjective” a “much simpler” sense than one would normally use (Patočka 1991, 184). In Patočka’s view, the “phenomenal sphere” is ‘subjective’ not because it coincides “with the essence in itself”, with the transcendental ego. Rather, “[i]t is something larger, more inclusive: it is a project of all the possible encounters with the essence” (Patočka 1991, 185). A phenomenon is said to be a “project of a possible encounter” (Patočka 1991, 185) to the extent that it is in relation to an ego sum that, as such, dwells in its situation and lives in possibilities. Better yet, the source of manifestation is a field of possibilities that – far from being made up by a subjective entity – actually ‘opens’ to an ego, placing itself as a condition of possibility for any possible encounter between the ego and the being.

In his account of the impurities of the ego as conceived of in the Logical Investigations, then, Patočka rethinks the ego as a Da-sein incarnated in a living body, whose practical-perceptive orientation towards the surrounding environment always precedes anything we would conventionally define as ‘subjectivity’.

Here Patočka joins those critics – led primarily by Levinas – who identify the weak point of Heideggerian existence in its lack of bodily consistency. While the ego of a subjective phenomenology is a conception of human existence that clearly echoes the existential analytic of Heidegger, the “openness” of this existence, for Patočka, emerges from a body motility which is involuntary and ungovernable because it is aroused by the vacuum-filling tension of vital necessities.

Patočka leads us to this conception of existence by rethinking the Heideggerian concept of “project” (Entwurf). More precisely, he radicalizes the original condition of ‘thrown-ness’ (Geworfenheit) in Heidegger’s idea of project. Refusing the Heideggerian project’s implementation of understanding (Verstehen) – which Patočka sees as the expression of a consolidated residual ‘subjectivism’ and, therefore, an ‘undetermined idealism’ (Patočka 1980b, 125) – Patočka understands thrown-ness as a horizon of possibilities. He explicitly denies a phenomenological status for this horizon: “there is no phenomenological project of possibilities” (Patočka 1980b, 125). Patočka writes: “the projection of one’s own possibilities is not an original creation of possibilities; neither a project of the world, but just a project of my existence based on the world” (Patočka 1980b, 125). Things themselves release feasible possibilities through their use, by asking existence to realize itself through the implementation of such usabilities:

The projection of possibilities is an activity whose nature is completely determined by possibility. Nevertheless, it is not a phenomenon. It rather works as a constructive
Riccardo Paparuss

operation. It is evident that it is only because I can that the things uncover themselves to me, in the context of my “power”. On the other hand, the I which can is able to show itself in its power only thank to the appeal that it receives from things themselves. I would not have any possibility if I did not have the means to realize possibilities, my possibilities.

(Patočka 1980b, 120)

The material background of the world accomplishes the movement of possibilities by establishing a relationship of attraction and repulsion with the kinesthetic system of the “living body” (Leib). The sentient body finds its way among the things of the surrounding environment and receives from things themselves, which attract and reject it, a field of possibilities which it in turn transfers to existence. By virtue of this privileged relationship of ‘meshing’ with things, Patočkan corporeality acts as a mediation center. The body is co-involved with existence, to which it is offering itself as a necessary candidate in the realization of the possibilities themselves. The mass of things, therefore, opens towards the ‘living body’ a field of possibilities where the existence, rooted in the body itself, perceives the manifestation of each single possible entity. It can be consequently inferred that Patočka’s phenomenality is a binary structure formed by the weaving between the ‘living body’-mass of things and the field of possibilities that opens up from the weaving itself.

The interweaving between the thing and ‘living body’ is posited by Patočka as an elementary relation. The totality of possibilities is not only formed by practical skills; behind it, Patočka identifies a succession of ‘appetites, desires, needs …’. Moreover, if the possibilities involve human existence through dynamics of attraction–repulsion, they open up, above all, from things that are related to the needy body, which satisfy its needs, its instincts, attracting or repulsing it. In other words, in Patočka’s view, the thing originally manifests itself as a nourishment, the object of instinct, of bodily desire, even before taking the form of a manageable and perceptible entity.

Above all else, things communicate to the ‘living body’ the possibilities of satisfaction of vital needs. Existential possibilities, in turn, arise from those needs, staying irreparably related to them. To arrive at a clearer understanding of the biological origin of existential possibilities, it is both useful and necessary here to read a salient passage from The Natural World and Phenomenology:

It is clear that the things that we handle and that we understand precisely through their manipulation are the things, which serve our needs, needs, which are implicated by our bodily functions and by our ability to provide. And such needs do not exist in isolation, as a single reality closed in and of themselves, but as concrete references: a key in the hands of a blacksmith refers to the lock, to the material used and to the lathe. Instead in the hand of the tenant it refers to the room with its furniture, its separateness from the outside, the workplace, and so on.

(Patočka 2009, 221)

To further understand the argument that Patočka develops in the lines above, we can read a passage from the Draft of Lectures on Corporeality, a text written one year after The Natural World and Phenomenology:

We are capable of getting dressed, of walking, of politely using a knife and fork, of reading and writing, of playing the violin or the piano, of driving a car, etc. Every action is a being around things, is a modification of things. Most of these modifications are necessary to prolong and renovate life, so that life itself manages to stand in the
Jan Patočka

...exact place where it already is. In fact, human life needs constant concern, because on top of being movement, it is a stationary vibration.

(Patočka 1980a, 70)

Here, Patočka recalls, radicalizes and even goes beyond Levinas’ work on “enjoyment”. He sees the thing as an element that fills the emptiness carried by the intention to satisfy the body. Such a body, as Levinas says in Totality and Infinity, is basically naked, destitute.

With Patočka, we realize that the possibility, the usability that originally asks existence to project, emerges first and foremost from a movement of attraction – or rejection – carried out by the elemental basis of the world in the naked body. In short, this possibility emerges from (and continuously returns to) the opportunity for biological satisfaction which the needy body is promised by the element.

One could otherwise say that Patočka reinterprets the Heideggerian “world-environment” (Umwelt) as being radicalized on a field belonging to the philosophy of life. To illustrate: the key in the hand of the blacksmith has its “for” (Wǒzú) in the lock and in the lathe. The key has its “in order to” (Um-zú) – which is to say, its usability – in the locking and unlocking of the door. However, the private, intimate handling that the blacksmith makes of the key reveals that the entire operation essentially recalls the naked body’s need for protection from the outside, a need itself belonging to the naked body of the blacksmith. Thus, the usability of the equipment emerges from the possibility of biological fulfillment and ultimately reconnects to it. The “for” thus emerges from the ‘cavity’ dug in the naked body by biological need; the “in order to” is developed from the ability to fill this need. Accordingly, the totality of “involvements” (Betwandtnis), the network of object-like entities in which every tool works “for” the other, is irradiated from a primary totality of biological fulfillments. In short, it originates from a primordial chain of connections between the elements and the needs that can be satisfied.

Given the analysis developed so far, it is possible to assume that the field of possibilities for human existence is opened by an elemental and biological link between thing and corporeality. Therefore, the asubjective phenomenality thought by Patočka can be understood as a double binary system made up of a corporeity–thing vital relationship and a field of biological possibilities – which in turn leads to a field of practical possibilities.

The ego sum, the incarnate Da-sein, keeps this dual field of possibilities in sight.

Now, the original biological and involuntary character of the field of possibilities makes this phenomenality impenetrable to any attempt at foundation-forming by human existence. At the same time, this protects the existence itself from any tendency towards the “subjective irruption”, which Patočka considers as the crucial flaw of Husserl’s transcendental consciousness.

53.3. Human existence in motion

The fundamental category through which Patočka defines incarnate existence as the ego of his asubjective phenomenology is movement. “Our existence”, he writes in Lesson Plans on Corporeality, “is of such a level that movement is not only essential to it, but it is all its nature.” To clarify, Patočka has a conception of human existence as a movement of possibility, namely as a movement of a being that can live in the realization of its possibilities.

This conception of existence stems from a radicalization of the Aristotelian idea of movement. Using a methodology borrowed from Heidegger’s existential analytic of Da-sein, Patočka gives an in-depth examination of the adherence between potency (dýnamis) and substrate (hypokeimenon). Here, it is useful to focus on a passage drawn from Lesson Plans on Corporeality.
Having described the Aristotelian conception of movement as a model for understanding the constitutive movement of human existence, Patočka writes:

Let suppose that we do not have a movement based on something, a movement of a possibility which has at its bottom something that persists and realizes itself in the possibilities. Suppose, therefore, that this something is its possibility, that in it there is nothing before and after the possibilities. Rather it lives only by being in its possibilities. In this way, we obtain the radicalization of the Aristotelian concept of movement, which is no longer defined by a common holder. TI METABALLON = the particular being, which we are speaking about, is not given in advance as common foundation of mutable determinations, but it is only in the possibility of encompassing all these determinations in a unique, global, sense-donation. The movement of this kind is also a *dynamis* which realizes itself, but not the *dynamis* of a being that exists in advance. Rather it is the *dynamis* of something which is not yet and which has the possibility of encompassing in itself and overcoming all the *dynamis* as their means, as moments of its situation. A movement of this kind recalls the movement of a melody or in general of a musical composition: each element is only a part of something exceeding it, which is not here from the beginning in a completed shape. Instead, in all its details, it is only prepared and as long as the composition keeps on playing it is always to-be.

(Patočka 1980a, 66–67)

Patočka intends to emancipate the movement from its traditional ontification. This is why the movement itself cannot consist, for him, as the mere shift of a substrate – something persistent, a subject – from the form of potency to actualized shape.

Patočka radicalizes the state of pure potency in which the substrate, the matter, is at the starting point of its movement. In this way, he replaces the human substrate – the *subjectum* – with the *dynamis*, the possibility. As pure potency of a certain form, the *hypokeimenon*, especially in its human iteration, is potentially disposed to adopt an indefinite spectrum of shapes. Better yet, because it could potentially assume all the possible forms, it tends to float in the *dynamis* of no form, in a possibility that is not that of a determined form (i.e. of an entity already provided in advance), but rather the possibility of an indefinite spectrum of possibilities, forms, acts.

In other words, Patočka sees the notion of *substrate* as being susceptible to the metaphysical projection of the notion of the subject. Namely, he is aware that modern metaphysics reads the notion of substrate through the lens of the subject, reducing the movement of the substrate to a movement of a subject. By this operation, modern metaphysics subjectivizes any and all movement. In order to avoid this reduction of humanity to subjectivity, Patočka turns the *hypokeimenon* of the human movement into a pure *dynamis*. In doing so, he reconceives of it as the movement of a possibility that is deprived of a predetermined ontic (and thus, subjective) foundation and is thus realized without ever definitively actualizing itself, as an *energeia atheles*. In other words, it realizes itself as an act of endlessly becoming, a possibility irreparably open, never crystallizing itself in the rigidity of a subject. In short, Patočka rethinks human existence as the motion of a project of an indefinite horizon of possibilities that, as such, can never achieve a definitive realization.

Now, as we have already acknowledged, the possibilities projected by Patočkán existence derive from the relationship between the needy living body and its elemental basis in the world. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that the movement of human existence as a motion of possibilities is originally triggered by the elemental, natural relationship between things and
corporeality. This is to say, human existence is an existential movement that is aroused, constantly passed through, and nourished by the bodily movement directed to satisfaction of biological need. It is precisely because of this that the movement in question develops as a blind telos, which, emerging from the nebulous and unintelligible ground of vital necessity, cannot proceed as a progressive, already speculated, advancement of the telos itself. This movement takes place as a continuous rise of an end, maturing itself successively on the original body-elemental ground. As a consequence, it unfolds itself as an irremediably open possibility, never crystallizable and attainable in any final sense.

Precisely because of this uneven character and its irreparable openness and incompleteness, this existential movement does not develop as a net succession of autonomous and disjointed moments. Rather it is articulated as a melodic movement whose phases follow by intersecting and clinging to one another.

53.4. The natural world

Patočka’s thematization of the notion of the “natural world” reaches its most significant development in “The Natural World and Phenomenology”. Here, the universal extension of the epoché leads to a rethinking of Husserl’s Lebenswelt as a “life-world” which is an original ‘natural’ dimension, not inhabited by a prior conscious structure. The “life-world”, thus redefined by Patočka, affirms itself as the elementary field of vital nourishment that causes the original movement (pohyb) through which human life relates to itself to gain self-consciousness.

The natural world, thus understood, is that pre-thematic sphere in which an ego is not yet present. It is the area, indeed, where human life originally develops the movement to face the original source of manifestation, so to understand itself in its own being and only then to work as an ego.

As this movement is centered on the original bodily orientation between things, it unfolds between the two main points of reference for such an orientation: the “earth” (země) and the “sky” (nebe).

By setting up the natural world between the extraneousness of “earth” and “sky”, Patočka strengthens its irreducibility to objectification. More precisely, the natural world receives from the “earth” and the “sky” the tension between familiarity and extraneousness (i.e. closeness and ‘distance’) that, as such, keeps any attempt at detecting a definite sense in check.

Patočka identifies three fundamental phases of movement in human existence: “anchoring” (zakotvení) or “rooting” (zakořenění); “self-removal in self-extension” (sebezvězdání); and “self-finding in self-surrender” (sebenalezení sebevzdání) (see Patočka 2009, 233; English translation 269).

The concern with the fulfillment of vital needs is the center of existence in the “anchoring” phase. At this stage, the movement develops as a dynamic of “acceptance” that roots human life in the ground of the “natural world”. Such a dynamic of anchoring and acceptance allows human existence to access the “natural world”. In doing so, it not only opens the movement of existence, but continues to flow and echo throughout the other two phases. Consequently, the second and third movement can elevate human existence from its rootedness only thanks to this original “rooting”.

In order to ensure the satisfaction of vital necessities, the fulfillment of biological needs to be organized. This organizational activity coincides with the second movement which, by rationalizing the process of conservation, comes to identify existence to its function, to the role that it plays in the exploitation of nutritional resources. Such a process of identification rids existence
of the possibility of accessing the most authentic nucleus of its being, reducing it to a merely ontic-biological level of being.

Each of the first two movements is characterized by a specific relationship to the other: the first is marked by an attitude of complete reliance and abandonment to the care of the other; in the second, human existence develops an attitude of opposition by which it reduces the other, and itself, to mere force, a means useful in the pursuit of economic objectives.

Furthermore, through the second movement, existence expands in attempting to optimize its performance more and more, thus losing itself in a spiral of rationalization, mechanization. For the expanded existence to find itself again, it is necessary to undertake a movement of unconditional “dedication” to others, an act of unforeseeable responsibility for others. This brings us to the third movement.

The third movement does not demand any guarantees of restitution; it suspends the rational economic circuit, propelling an existence towards the attainment of self-consciousness. The act of “dedication” culminates in the realization of a mutual interpenetration of individuals, through which the human being can finally be recognized, not in terms of its object-hood, but as a consciousness.

As unconditional devotion to the other, the third movement consists of a universal renewal of that acceptance of the other which is the necessary basis of the first movement: “rooting”. Thus, through the movement of “dedication”, the human life reveals an openness and an infinity that were announced already, originally, in the field of first movement. Here, human existence is rooted in the natural world only as a ‘foreign guest’ of the other who accepts it, and therefore it is already decentralized. In other words, through “dedication” human existence reveals an openness, which it shows implicitly already in the movement of “rooting”. Accordingly, the third movement exposes existence to a phenomenal field, which is already present within the dimension of anchoring, though the rooted existence is not fully aware of it.

This brings to the surface an openness that already passes through the movement of rooting. And in doing so, it exposes the existence to a whole before the parts, which was already opening within the anchoring dimension without the rooted existence being fully aware of it.

In The Natural World and Phenomenology, Patočka concludes the thematization of the third movement precisely by returning our attention to the movement of “rooting”.

Any doing, any orientation or behavior must be preceded by an anchorage, a rooting that takes place in the dimension of passivity, of being exposed. It is here that, first of all, a whole is opened up to the parts and is essentially inexhaustible and we discover our relationship with it – or, better yet, its relationship with us – in affectivity, in the way it intonates with us as we are exposed, as we are open and sensitive to it.

(Patočka 2009, 263)

Rooting, then, is a phase of existence when the “living body” is anchored to the ground of the surrounding world with which the body itself establishes an organic bond. And this, in turn, emanates vital-practical possibilities that help existence to orient itself among other things. The “dedication” of the third movement leads to an openness that embryonically traverses the “natural world” in the “rooting” phase.

Thus, through unconditional devotion to others, existence returns to the anchoring step to grasp, as a unitary structure, the naked “living body”, the thing and its field of organic-practical possibilities. That is, a whole before the parts – which appears to the existence as the source of manifestation for both the being and the existence itself.
Notes

1 Here I provide my direct translation from the Czech original version since the English edition misses the translation of this fragment. All the page references are to the translations listed in the bibliography below.

2 This fragment has been directly translated from the original Czech version.

3 The translation of the words mentioned has been modified on the basis of the original version.

References


