

Ways of Self-Transcendence: On Sacrifice for Nothing and Hyperbolic Ontology

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Abstract

This article will take Jan Patočka's concepts of care for the soul and sacrifice for nothing as a starting point to discuss the ontological premises of a renewed *epimeleia heautou*, or care of the self. I will argue that Patočka understands the ancient Good in terms of Heidegger's ontological difference. Care for the soul thus ends up with an empty transcendence. In contrast, I will advocate a hyperbolic concept of Being. All that exists is characterized by being beyond beingness, an inner transcendence of itself. This provides new ontocosmological as well as political perspectives.

Keywords

care of the self – hyperbolic ontology – Jan Patočka – self-sacrifice – self-transcendence

1 Introduction

In a short text published so far only in French, Pierre Hadot contests Michel Foucault's interpretation of the ancient *meletai* or spiritual exercises as an "aesthetics of existence" turning one's life into a work of art. For the ancient thinkers, Hadot writes, the beautiful was not a reality in its own right. Rather, it was intimately connected with the Good: "In fact, what the ancient philosophers are looking for, is primarily not beauty (*kalon*), but the Good (*agathon*)."¹ The orientation towards the Good implies a specific relationship to life and

¹ Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, p. 308. My own translation.

death. As paradigmatic Hadot cites a passage from Sallust's *On the Gods and the World*: "The souls endued with virtue disdain (*méprisent*) existence for the sake of the Good, when they expose themselves to the most imminent dangers for their country or friends, or in the cause of virtue."² This connection of the supramundane Good with virtue and the disregard for worldly existence gives the *meletai* – which form the main core of ancient *epimeleia heautou* – a different character than in Foucault. They are less concerned with a "culture of the self." Rather, they aim at an "exceeding", a "transgression of the self" (*dépassement de soi*).³ As Hadot points out, it is precisely this transgression of the self beyond worldly existence, this self-transgression for the sake of the Good, that constitutes the "*sagesse*", or *sophia*, the wisdom to which the philosophers as "lovers of wisdom" aspire.⁴

What especially interests me about Hadot's remarks is the ancient – Platonic, Stoic, Epicurean – concept of a transcendent Good and its impact on one's attitude towards life. In the ancient version, the Good is beyond all things, both sensible and intelligible, and exceeds them. This is why it enables those orienting themselves towards it to also exceed their worldly self. For example, and as Hadot argues against Foucault in another passage, to which we will return, Seneca is not concerned with finding joy in himself, that is, "in 'Seneca,' but by transcending 'Seneca.'"⁵

Readiness for death is evidence of the ability to transcend oneself. One can even say that it is its touchstone. Superficially, it applies to certain objects of value, the friends, one's country or community, or virtue. Its real concern, however, is the Good. The virtuous souls give their live "*propter bonum*," as Sallust writes. According to the two causal meanings of "*propter*," they give it first because or for the sake of the Good and second by means or in virtue of the Good.⁶ Thus, giving one's life is an act of self-transcendence and as such it forcefully testifies to both the transcendence and the transcending power of the Good.

Hadot frequently emphasizes the topicality of the spiritual exercises, however, without really specifying it. One might say that it consists in the fact that

2 Cited in Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, p. 308. My translation follows Hadot's translation from the Latin. Note that the Latin does not speak of disdain of existence (*mépriser l'être à cause du bien*). More neutrally it states that the virtuous souls do not care about their existence: "animis quippe virtute praeditis propter bonum nihil cura est quod sint." See Sallust, *De diis et mundo*, v.

3 Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, p. 308.

4 Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, p. 308 et seq.

5 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 207.

6 Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*.

ancient *epimeleiai heautou* integrally relates Being, thinking and living to each other. Thus, it ensures that thinking as well as practice acquire a certain profundity while at the same time preventing thinking from being purely abstract and practice from being solely pragmatic. There is an intimate relationship of theory and practice here, which in turn is integrated into the larger context of cosmical Being, a vision of reciprocity, correspondence and relationality that is sorely lacking today. This raises the question of how the “ancient experience” (Hadot) of the spiritual exercises may be revived in the present, given that our understanding of the cosmos and of nature has fundamentally changed since antiquity. Is it possible to establish similar forms of interrelatedness and connectivity? Can we think of equivalent ways of self-transcendence?

In this paper, I will address these questions in discussion with Jan Patočka. Patočka certainly belongs to those “others”⁷ who at the same time as Hadot and Foucault, rediscovered the ancient spiritual exercises, discussing them under the heading of “care for the soul.”⁸ In fact, Patočka even has a certain advantage over the two other authors in that he takes *epimeleia heautou* in its overall context while also adapting it to the present. This distinguishes him on the one hand from Foucault, who consciously put aside the cosmological, logical, and ontological aspect of the spiritual exercises as “enormous excrescences,”⁹ and on the other hand from Hadot, who at best developed between the lines how *epimeleia heautou* could be related to the contemporary situation. By contrast, Patočka does not only stress its significance for today. Rather, he both develops it in detail with a view to the modern situation as he takes its overall structure into account.

Despite these qualities, however, I will argue that Patočka’s interpretation of *epimeleia heautou* is not entirely satisfying. This is so because he transforms the ancient Good into the notion of Being as non-objective nothing, or rather, no-thing. In other words, Patočka understands the Platonic *chorismos* in terms of Heidegger’s ontological difference. In doing so, he charges *epimileia heautou* with negativity. Its drive of transcendence literally leads to nothing. It is but a manifestation of pure difference. By contrast, I will reclaim the positive meaning of the Good that informs the spiritual exercises, however, without adopting the ancient patterns of interpretation. The key to this lies in revisiting the hyperbolic vision of the Good of Plato’s *Politeia*. Like Heideggerian Being it is not an object and forms an ontological difference. Unlike Heideggerian

7 Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, p. 311.

8 “Péče o duši” or “starost o duši” in Czech, which can also be rendered as “care of the soul.” Petr Lom, the translator of *Plato and Europe*, choose this option.

9 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 25.

Being, however, the hyperbolic Good is not characterized by withdrawal from objectivity, but by a movement beyond, a movement of transgression and self-transgression. As noted, the question of self-sacrifice here serves as a touchstone. According to Patočka, authentic sacrifice is sacrifice for nothing, one could also say in Latin “*propter nihil*.” In contrast, Sallust understands authentic self-sacrifice as an act “*propter bonum*,” a hyperbolic act, as I will show, for it derives from the hyperbole of Being.

In dealing with Patočka, I will refer primarily to his *Plato and Europe*, which elaborates the care for the soul in greater detail. In addition, I will consult other texts such as *Negative Platonism*, the Varna lecture, and the *Heretical Essays*. Let me also add that Patočka bases his analysis of *epimeleia heautou* to a large extent on Socrates and Plato. One may justify this by the fact that – as Hadot notes, too¹⁰ – later reflections on the spiritual exercises also invoked the example of Socrates and Plato. Patočka’s interpretation thus refers to the paradigmatic core of the *meletai*, which gives it a certain general validity.

2 Patočka’s Care for the Soul

According to Patočka, the care for the soul has three interrelated aspects. To let Patočka speak for himself:

[T]here are three currents of care of the soul: the first is ontocosmological; the second is care of the soul in the community as the conflict of two ways of life. [...] The third current is care of the soul regarding its inner life, its relation toward the body and incorporeality, the problem of death and immortality. This is the third, most intimate, most inner current.¹¹

I will first focus on the interrelation of the ontocosmological and the inner, intimate current, which specifies the care for the soul as care for death (*meletē thanatou*). This will demonstrate the subtle interventions by which Patočka transforms the care for the soul to suit his own philosophical interests. I will address the political aspect in greater detail in the following section when I discuss Patočka’s notion of sacrifice.

Patočka’s description of the ontocosmological aspect comes close to Hadot’s analysis. Care for the soul does not mean an egocentric circling around oneself. On the contrary, an essential part of it consists precisely in the fact that

10 Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, pp. 19–74.

11 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 97. Emphasis by Patočka.

individuals leave their own particular perspective and refer to the cosmos as the ordered Whole of Being, of which they are only vanishingly small elements. This allows them to distance themselves from the contingencies of life and the affective impulses with which they react to them. They experience themselves as irreducible to this, and they thus gain unity and solidity. To quote from Patočka: “The soul that really cares for itself takes on a solid form [...] This is the attempt to embody what is eternal within time, and within one’s own being, and at the same time, an effort to stand firm in the storm of time, stand firm in all dangers carried with it.”¹² As both Patočka and Hadot note, however, being solid and affectively untouched is not the final result of the ancient *meletai*, but only their goal. It will never be fully realized. This is why, according to Hadot, Socrates, the emblematic figure of the spiritual exercises, knows that he is not a sage, a *sophos*, but only a *philosophos*, that is, someone striving for *sophia*.¹³ This is also why the Platonic eros is between the temporal and the supra-temporal realm. And this is why, according to Patočka, “to be in unity with one’s own self [...] is incredible work, the work of a whole life.”¹⁴ Accordingly, Patočka’s summary of Platonic philosophy: “Cosmology has shown where the soul stands in the whole of existence; it is the origin of movement, it can only be understood in movement.”¹⁵ The transcendent eternal and the soul are in constant tension, and the movement of the soul carries this out.

In *Plato and Europe*, Patočka keeps his terminology as neutral as possible when dealing with the ontocosmological aspect of the care for the soul. This allows him to integrate certain ambivalences. The first ambivalence is that between a factual introduction to ancient thought on the one side (*Plato and Europe* was held as an underground seminar, aimed also at listeners without philosophical education) and a philosophical appropriation on the other. The second ambivalence characterizes Patočka’s general relationship to Plato at least since his “negative Platonism” of the 1950s. This is the ambivalence between Plato’s metaphysical doctrine of ideas and the Socratic motive of knowing-not-knowing, of the erotic movement of the soul, of problematization and questioning.

The actual adaptation of the care for the soul takes place when Patočka addresses its inner, intimate aspect, which culminates in the problem of death. Even if his account thus goes beyond the self, he recurs to it when his actual

12 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 87.

13 Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, p. 119.

14 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 180.

15 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 124.

concern for the care for the soul is at stake. Let us note here a subliminal primacy of the self, that is, the individual, finite perspective.

Significantly, as soon as death becomes an issue, terminological neutrality dissolves and the ontocosmological problem is specified as the problem of Being. Thus, the passage in which Patočka discusses death in more detail states with previously lacking clarity: “[T]he philosophical problem [is] the problematic of being”, and: “[The] third aspect is the relation of the soul to it itself and its temporal and eternal being.”¹⁶ The difference between the temporal and the eternal, in turn, proves to be the difference between the real, which is the objective, and the unreal, which is “mere Being”: “This world is the world of things, it is the world of realities, whereas what awaits man in death is mere being – and it is not any kind of thing.”¹⁷ This sentence is remarkable, since Patočka here openly leaves the Platonic thought pattern. It is not the ideal realm that awaits the soul after death, but mere non-objective Being. The third aspect of the care for the soul, the care for death is, therefore, also the care for Being, even if now from an individual and existential, rather than ontocosmological and objective perspective. In a sense, care for death corrects ontocosmology and clarifies its actual concern, which is Being as such, rather than the eternal order of the cosmos. There is an unmistakable proximity to Heidegger’s analysis of death in *Being and Time*. There, too, the confrontation with death leads to the disclosure of Being. Accordingly, Patočka, like Heidegger, connects the confrontation with death to freedom. This is what Heidegger writes in § 53 of *Being and Time*: “When, by anticipation, one becomes free for one’s own death, one is liberated from one’s lostness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one.”¹⁸ Similarly, Patočka states: “Death is at the same time the completion of our freedom, completion in the sense that from the world of things we cross to mere being.”¹⁹ As we have seen, the world of things is also the world of accidental possibilities, that is, of contingency. Care for death as well as running ahead toward death (*Vorlaufen in den Tod*) liberate from this world by orienting the individual towards Being as such. In other words, they open up the ontological difference. They show that human beings cannot be fully reduced to an objective meaning, because they can direct themselves to that which also has no objective meaning, namely Being as such.

As noted above, the readiness to give one’s life under certain circumstances is the touchstone of *epimeleia heautou*. Self-sacrifice is both the most concrete and the most extreme expression of transcending the worldly entanglements

16 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 135.

17 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 137.

18 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 308.

19 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 137.

of existence. Since Patočka's care for the soul rejects any objective meaning, the transcendence of self-sacrifice must also take place in the framework of Being, which is nothing. Self-sacrifice, therefore, will not be to a specific cause, for example, a political cause, nor will it testify to the universal order of the cosmos or to the "beyond of Being," which is the Good. Rather, as Patočka states in his Varna lecture from 1973, self-sacrifice will be "sacrifice for nothing."²⁰ As Patočka explains, in the technological age, which is late modernity, there is a peculiar ambiguity. On the one hand, human lives are used as mere objective factors, as resources for a new arrangement of the world. On the other hand, however, and as various revolutions and the two world wars have proved, people are willing to die for this new arrangement. The point is that through their readiness to sacrifice themselves they show that they are more than objective factors. By being capable of transcending what they factually are, they refer to their very freedom, however, without understanding it. Sacrifice for nothing responds to this situation. It is the sacrifice of those who understand. It is a conscious sacrifice, a sacrifice that is not made for something, but for freedom itself. It testifies to the fact that people are never objective factors but, on the contrary, irreducible to objectivity. By their very existence they transcend what they factually are. One could also call sacrifice for nothing "sacrifice for pure difference." It testifies to human beings not being a thing, because they are able to refer to Being, and Being has no content. It is nothing. Therefore, there is transcendence in sacrifice for nothing. However, it is negative. Sacrifice for nothing is the ultimate act of not taking part. It is an act of rejection and, therefore, it can only imply negative statements such as "I am not a thing," "human beings are not reducible to objectivity," "Being has no objective meaning," or also, and more concretely, "I have no political programs to offer."²¹ There is nothing to proclaim except that there is difference and irreducibility, which, however, do not realize themselves in anything objective. Rather, they manifest themselves in negation, culminating in the willing extinction of one's own life.

3 Objections

Patočka's approach raises several questions. First, from a psychological perspective, one may wonder if a sacrifice for nothing is even possible, or if it is not an abstraction. Is it possible for someone to die for the sake of pure

²⁰ Patočka, *The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger (Varna Lecture 1973)*, p. 22.

²¹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 135.

ontological difference? That is, not out of nihilism, not out of resignation, but for the sake of Being as such? Even Patočka admits that those sacrificing themselves for nothing do not “ignore or make light of certain concrete social goals,” although their actual focus is different.²² But even supposing there was someone of tremendous philosophical self-discipline capable of dying for Being as such, for the ontological difference, the moment her death became public it would be used for certain political goals. It is simply the case that acts of human self-transcendence are usually connected to something objective.

However, this observation may be too simple. Patočka’s perspective is less psychological than ontological. It is the interpretation of self-sacrifice from the perspective of Being as such, which cannot be reduced to anything objective. Thus, even if Patočka does not make this sufficiently clear, one may argue that what he emphasizes is not that someone willingly dies for the ontological difference. Rather, his point is that acts of self-sacrifice are at all possible only by virtue of the ontological difference. Because of this, they testify to both Being as such and the distance of human beings from the objective conditions in which they find themselves.

The actual problem is what follows from this notion of human transcendence for political action. This point is all the more important since, as noted above, Patočka himself considers the political as the second aspect of the care for the soul. Let us assume that in sacrifice for nothing, human beings transcend themselves by virtue of Being, which is nothing. They transcend themselves “*propter nihil*.” As a result, the act of transcendence remains empty. It demonstrates solely the distance to the objective. There is literally nothing but this distance, this difference. Again, this implies, as quoted, that there are no programs to be offered, but not only that. In fact, the difference of an empty transcendence offers no positive vision at all. For what could it be based on if there is only nothing? And what could it contain other than the notion that human beings do not merge into the objective? Acts of transcendence “*propter nihil*” can only establish the distance and remain in it. The actual living conditions, by contrast, depend on the forces of the objective. Patočka illustrates this pretty well when in *Plato and Europe*, he describes the care for the soul as “constantly examining,” adding: “And only in that which resists this examining do they [that is, those caring for their souls] take on their own form.”²³ What gives form to life, the objective conditions are beyond those who attempt to live authentically, who care for the soul “*propter nihil*.” They receive them

22 Patočka, *The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger (Varna Lecture 1973)*, p. 21.

23 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 120.

passively, without any impulse of their own, except an inner distance, some kind of *reservatio mentalis* by virtue of Being, which is nothing. They may be able to question, to examine. Yet what they question is given to them. They were not involved in its creation.²⁴

One may respond that the experience of an empty transcendence allows for working on a social order that preserves the difference between human beings and the objective. This, at least, seems to be the point of Patočka's interpretation of the ancient *polis*. However, Patočka also notes the precarious character of the *polis*. On the one hand, it is based on the insight embodied by the philosopher: that human beings do not coincide with the objective. Or in Patočka's words: "Because care of the soul is possible, the state is also possible, and the community is also possible."²⁵ On the other hand, however, the *polis* subordinates all things to self-preservation so that, ultimately, it tends to objectify human life and to get rid of the philosopher who, while examining, "does not mix into what others do."²⁶ Therefore, for the philosopher, the *polis* is always a potentially deadly place.²⁷ Precisely the rule of the philosopher-king envisaged by Plato seems impossible for Patočka. For him, what is genuinely philosophical, that is, the understanding of distance, of transcendence, of a possible sacrifice "*propter nihil*," may only indirectly touch the political sphere. A direct relationship is excluded. The philosopher is there to examine, not to act. Philosophy is there to question, not to answer. As a faithful reflection of the ontological difference, the difference between the transcendent and the political dimension must also be kept pure.

To illustrate the consequences, one can refer to one of Patočka's most famous concepts, namely the solidarity of the shaken. The *Heretical Essays* connect it with the front line of the First World War, that is, to a place exemplary of the violent history of the 20th century and its many senseless sacrifices for nothing. For Patočka, who follows Ernst Jünger and Teilhard de Chardin in this, the experience of being senselessly sacrificed in war can become an experience of empty transcendence. Two things result from this, first, the experience of "absolute freedom, freedom from all the interests of peace, of life, of the day,"²⁸ in sum, from all that may bear objective meaning; second, the aforementioned solidarity of the shaken. Following Patočka, it leads to "the adversary [becoming] a fellow participant in the same situation,

24 Notably, Patočka's own political engagement as the first signatory and spokesperson for Charter 77 deviates from this.

25 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 121.

26 Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, p. 113 et seq.

27 See Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, pp. 61–66.

28 Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 129 et seq.

fellow discoverer of absolute freedom with whom agreement is possible in difference.”²⁹ And there is even more: “Here we encounter the abysmal realm of the ‘prayer for the enemy,’ the phenomenon of ‘loving those who hate us’ – the solidarity of the shaken for all their contradiction and conflict.”³⁰ However, there is not the slightest sign in Patočka of a much deeper solidarity, and a far more decisive “no” to the status quo,³¹ namely that the soldiers, whom the situation has turned into mere objects, rise from the trenches, throw away their weapons, and embrace each other. This solidarity, which would possibly be the beginning of a really different politics, has no place in Patočka. It would suspend the pure difference, the empty transcendence. It would merge it too much with the objective, with concrete action, with the belief in peace, in life, in the day. However, Patočka then need not wonder why the “grandiose experience” (*velká zkušenost*)³² of the front line, as he rather unfortunately puts it, “not had a decisive effect on the history of the twentieth century?”³³ For one may also ask the counter question: How could it have had any effect if, according to Patočka, it consisted in passively enduring a situation of abysmal violence without any impulse to change it? If one follows Patočka, there is no way to transform human non-objectifiability and transcendence into direct political action, because they would turn into one force among other forces and would thus be objectified.

4 Reinventions

One of the lessons of 20th century totalitarianism was to be wary of any absolutization of politics. This explains why Patočka shies away from relating the experience of absolute freedom and transcendence directly to the political, why he emphasizes living in truth, to quote another of his more famous terms, as living in difference. However, history has not stood still since then. Especially the last three decades after the end of real-existing socialism have shown what it means to leave the political field to diverse forces, be it the forces of the market, of technology, or of populist agitated opinion. In the final analysis, they lead to another dissolution of the political, which Patočka feared, however, which this time is non-totalitarian. Slavoj Žižek describes this as “the

29 Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 130.

30 Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 130.

31 Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 135.

32 Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 131.

33 Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 131.

exceptional situation where the political dimension is not simply repressed, but rather foreclosed,³⁴ and he calls “to reinvent that which is to be defended.”³⁵ As I believe, reinventing the political requires a revision of the relationship between the transcendent non-objectifiable and the political itself. What is at stake is a third option between the alternative of an empty transcendence and the complete political appropriation of the absolute core of the transcendent. This revision will not offer any practical program, too. However, it may allow “to think the contemporary re-opening of the possibility of the political,”³⁶ as another partisan of reinvented politics, Alain Badiou, puts it. According to Badiou, truth and the absolute will thus again prove to be genuine categories of the political. The crucial point is how to integrate the absolute into the political and into human practice in general without letting it merge into it. As Badiou notes, the reinvention of the political therefore implies a reinvention of philosophy, or “philosophy’s new beginning.”³⁷ I follow him in this by proposing what I call a hyperbolic ontology.³⁸ The subsequent sections offer some of its main ideas in the form of a brief sketch.

Let us start from the problem of self-sacrifice. Its formula appears in what Hadot quoted from Sallust. There are souls, or individuals, that because of the Good – “*propter bonum*” – “neglect the care of their being, when they expose themselves to the most imminent dangers for their country or friends, or in the cause of virtue.”³⁹ They die for something, however, this is not what drives their readiness to sacrifice. Rather, there is more than something, more beyond something, namely the Good. The Good is neither an object nor Being, which is nothing. In the first case, one would sacrifice oneself for something after all, for some kind of hyper-object. In the second case, one would follow the path of an empty transcendence. But already Plato identifies the Good as neither objective nor empty. Rather, as he famously puts it in the *Politeia*, the Good is *epekeina tēs ousias* (Rep 509b), that is, as one may translate it, it is beyond beingness.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, it has a content, for example, one can describe it

34 Vighi/Feldner, *Žižek*, p. 158 et seq.

35 Žižek, *Iraq*, p. 35, quoted from Vighi/Feldner, *Žižek*, p. 160.

36 Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 85.

37 Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 98.

38 I would like to take this opportunity to express my respect for William Desmond’s metaxological philosophy, from which I was able to learn quite a bit.

39 Sallust, *De diis et mundo*, v.

40 How to understand this expression is an age-old question. According to the two main approaches, it would either mean that the Good is beyond essence or beyond Being. For a detailed discussion, see Ferber, *Platonische Aufsätze*, pp. 139–146. I follow Heidegger, but also a leading figure of the Tübingen School, Hans Joachim Krämer, in translating *ousia* as beingness (*Seiendheit*). See Krämer, *EPEKEINA TĒS OUSIAS*. The term “beingness”

as “miraculously beautiful by nature” (Sym 210e), even if it appears neither as a physical object nor as a defined meaning (*logos*) or a cognition (*epistēmē*) (Sym 211a). Its most appropriate characterization may therefore lie in an expression of exuberance. In Rep 509c, Glaucon, overwhelmed by the Socratic Good, calls it a *daimonia hyperbolē*. So, it is something hyperbolic from which the “objects of knowledge” not only receive “their being known”, but also “their very existence and essence” (Rep 509b). And the same hyperbolic quality of Being enables humans to die for something without solely dying for it. Rather, by dying for something, they at the same time testify to the beyond of any something, which, however, is constitutive for every something.

In its basic assumptions, a hyperbolic account of Being differs both from orthodox Platonism and, more importantly, from Heidegger’s seminal thinking of Being, which also influences Patočka. Regarding the former, it operates with the concept of the Good. However, the Good is not the guarantor of the supratemporal order of the cosmos in which the individual dissolves into the general (this point would need more discussion, of course). Rather, the focus is on the Good’s exuberant character, its being-beyond. Regarding the latter, the emphasis is on the primacy of Being over finitude. Even the later Heidegger does not succeed in detaching himself from the central notion of *Being and Time*, namely that the structures of Being disclose themselves in recourse to the originary temporality of finite *Dasein*. Being thus has a throughout abysmal character in Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, presence dissolves in the three extases of time, each one groundless in its own way, characterized by thrownness or benumbment or death. But the abysmal understanding of Being also affects Heidegger’s later aletheiology, albeit in a transformed manner. While Being sends out historical epochs on one side, it withholds itself on the other. Negativity thus continues to be a constitutive moment of Being. Being gives itself and lets all things be, however, against the background of its own abysmal concealment. It is not difficult to still recognize finite human experience in this, the continuous withdrawal of presence in presence itself.

By contrast, hyperbolic ontology detaches Being from any reduction to human experience. It is true that Being is not an object and therefore not accessible in an objective manner. However, the inaccessibility of Being is not due to its withdrawal (which bears the mark of finite experience). Rather, it is related to its hyperbolic character. Being unfolds itself completely at all

comprises both existence and essence insofar as they are related to an object. The Good, by contrast, is not an object. Let me add, however, that my concern at this point is not so much an accurate interpretation of Plato, but the elaboration of certain motifs that can be taken from Plato.

times, and in doing so, it constitutes finite things and at the same time goes beyond them. The proper name of Being is thus not *alētheia*, but *hyperbolē*. Its main structure is being-beyond – being beyond human understanding, being beyond worldly existence, but also being beyond time, which structures worldly existence. Being is ever-surpassing inexhaustibility. It is insofar as it is Being-beyond-beingness – *epekeina tēs ousias*, to use Plato's term again.

A hyperbolic notion of Being allows to understand the peculiar dialectic in Seneca's notion of self-sacrifice, that is, how it is possible to die for something and at the same time not die for it, but for something else that is not a thing. The point to note here is that since beings exist by virtue of Being, the hyperbole of Being applies to them as well. Being realizes itself in letting beings be. Therefore, they, too, exist in being driven beyond themselves. They, too, are characterized by being-beyond. To illustrate this, one may think of how existents appear from the perspective of love. When we love someone, he or she appears transfigured in a unique way. It is the same person, but at the same time that person is more than he or she is. We can give reasons why we love that person. But they will never exhaust the experience of the radiance of the beloved, this wondrous transcendence or "*mirabilis excessus*," as Marsilio Ficino called it.⁴¹ Thus, love is one way to reveal the Being-beyond-beingness of the beloved, their hyperbolic character that they, like every existent, owe to hyperbolic Being.

All of this gives a certain complexity to self-sacrifice, but also to political practice and a possible new *epimeleia heautou*.

To stay with self-sacrifice for now, first, and on a general level, the hyperbole of Being allows for a different ontological basis for self-sacrifice than Patočka's. It is not negativity, but rather the hyperbole of Being that allows humans to perform the specific transcendence of self-sacrifice, whether they know about it or not. Second, having a notion of the Good – of Being-beyond-beingness – allows one to sacrifice oneself without absolutizing the object of self-sacrifice. Important as it is, it is so only in the light of the Good, that is, by establishing a relationship with Being-beyond-beingness, by showing that there is more to the existent than what there is. This is essential for the decision of whether it is worth dying for something or not. Due to the hyperbolic quality of Being, it is always possible to transcend oneself, even if for nothing. Think of Camus's reflection on suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which develops this most succinctly. Likewise, everything has a dignity and integrity that consists in being beyond itself (as we can know through love, for example). Yet not every object is able to materialize the being-beyond of Being at any time. To stay with

41 Ferber, *Platonische Aufsätze*, p. 129.

Sallust's example, one's country or friends could be aggressive and violent and oppress others – certainly not something to die for, but rather something to separate from. On the other hand, situations can be imagined in which the transcendent quality of Being manifests itself in one's friends or even in one's country. In these situations, it may be appropriate to die for them, yet again, not for them as such, but insofar as they are beyond themselves, both demonstrating and manifesting the hyperbolic character of Being.

Since self-sacrifice is the touchstone of conscious human practice, some of the aspects mentioned also apply to political practice. To reiterate, a hyperbolic ontology cannot be at the basis of political programs. Nevertheless, it can engage in reinventing the political. It can show how the absolute plays into political processes, however, without absolutizing them. Therefore, a hyperbolic ontology allows for certain guidelines. The main one is to maintain the tension between the existent and its transcendent or hyperbolic quality. On the one hand, everything has dignity and integrity consisting in its constitutive being beyond itself, even beyond what it currently appears to be. This needs to be safeguarded. On the other hand, nothing has absolute value in itself, but only because of the hyperbolic that, in a sense, suspends it. Decision must keep the balance between these two poles. One may call this the hyperbolic imperative. However, since the hyperbolic is about the intertwining of the absolute and the finite, the perspective on the absolute will always be relative. How to decide therefore depends on the situation. It is a question of ad hoc judgement. There are no ready-made patterns. The modern insight into the historicity of Being cannot be taken back. And this is also a good thing. It gives the freedom to create new approaches, to experiment with possible new forms of life.

Hyperbolic thinking has more to do with life than with death. The hyperbolic character of Being may enable humans to give their lives under certain circumstances, that is, for something but because of its inner transcendence. As a priority, however, it should lead to another "aesthetics of existence," which, unlike Foucault's, does not consider the self alone, but opens itself to everything that exists. Herein lies the meaning of Hadot's aforementioned claim that Seneca does not wish "to find his joy in 'Seneca,' but by transcending 'Seneca.'"⁴² As Hadot adds, by transcending himself, Seneca opens himself to the universal. He discovers "that there is within him – within all human beings, that is, and within the cosmos itself – a reason which is a part of universal reason."⁴³ Reason is the old supra-temporal universal, which orders the world from above. A new hyperbolic approach replaces this with the non-objectifiable hyperbole of Being that lets beings transcend themselves from within. Thanks to it, Seneca

42 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 207.

43 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 207.

can experience that he is beyond Seneca. No worldly form, be it his social roles, his character traits, or his outward appearance, in short, all that makes him the person called “Seneca,” can capture this. Thanks to the hyperbole of Being, however, Seneca like any other human being can experience that all other things of the cosmos are beyond themselves, too. They are all more than what they factually are. Both experiences belong together and one can use them for a hyperbolic *epimeleia heautou*, a cosmic exercise in transcendence. It distances from the existent, but it at the same time elevates the existent in a non-objective, qualitative sense. By virtue of hyperbolic Being, everything is beyond itself, everything is more than it is. This may be the immeasurable measure of both living and dying.

Biography

Sandra Lehmann has a postdoc position at the Department of Intercultural Philosophy of Religion, Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Vienna. After several research and teaching visits at universities in Austria (Vienna, Linz), the Czech Republic (Prague, Olomouc), Israel (Jerusalem), and Spain (Seville), she was a deputy professor in Perception Theory at Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach in 2019. Additionally, in 2019–2020, she was a visiting professor at the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Kassel.

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