

Beyond Learning, Back to the Care of the Soul? Socrates, Patočka, and the “Worldward” Movement of Education

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AGAINST LEARNING: AN ARENDTIAN VIEW

In the 2000s, when the discourse of learning was particularly thriving and (at least in the European context) it seemed to be impossible or suspiciously reactionary to speak of education without pivoting on the idea of learning (and derivatives: learner, learning to learn as a meta-competence, learning society, etc.), Jan Masschelein and Gert Biesta not only objected to this drift but vindicated the deployment of a different vocabulary in order for education not to capitulate to a tendency that put its specificity at risk.¹ In this critical effort, among other sources, they both referred to Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*.² In the admittedly selective and possibly idiosyncratic reading here proposed, I will reconstruct their theses as a continuum, in which Masschelein appeals to Arendt’s analysis of *labor* for the *pars destruens*, whereas Biesta marshals her view of (political) *action* for the *pars construens*.

I will take my cue from Arendt’s tripartite phenomenology of the active life, in which she distinguishes *labor* as that kind of activity “which corresponds to the biological process of the human body;” *work*, through which human beings build “an artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings” and they, thus, introduce duration and solidity in their environment; and, finally, *action* understood as “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter.”³ It is important to highlight how, insofar as they ‘act’ as laborers, human beings do not properly have any world but something like an environment. We can say that Arendt creatively interweaves Marx and Heidegger. From the former she takes the definition of *labor* as “‘man’s metabolism with nature’, in whose process ‘nature’s material [is] adapted by a change of form to the wants of man’, so that ‘labour has incorporated itself with its subject’ ... This cycle needs to be

sustained through consumption, and the activity which provides the means of consumption is labouring.”⁴ From Heidegger (despite the fact that she does not quote him explicitly) she draws the distinction between *Welt* and *Umwelt*. Playing on the German word for behavior (*Benahmen*) Heidegger argues that to those beings that have only an environment pertains a specific torpid captivation (*Benommenheit*), which is another way of saying that they are trapped within the cycle of bare life and, therefore, unable to access that disclosure through which something like a world appears and, thus, a relation to beings as beings.⁵

Mobilizing Arendt’s view on labor and her idea that modern society, as a society of laborers, has evolved into “the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public,”⁶ Masschelein argues that “the discourse of learning society is at the same time an effect and an instrument of the victory of *animal laborans*. The discourse objectifies and problematises educational reality in terms of “learning” (and “learning to learn”) and not of teaching; and this learning (to learn) is at the same time considered as the organizing principle of society, meaning amongst other things that all members (and citizens) of such a society are primarily defined as permanent learners ... ”⁷ From this view Masschelein concludes that “this discourse on the one hand expresses what I want to call the ‘logic of bare life’ or the ‘logic of survival’, that is, a zoological imperative, while on the other hand it shapes that logic and brings it into being. ... We could say that the learning society is the public organization of the life process of the individual and of ‘mankind’ defined as a learning species.”⁸

The emphasis is, therefore, on the goal of equipping the learners with those behavioral and cognitive skills that will enable them to cope with and to flexibly adapt to constantly changing environments. It is absolutely appropriate that the discourse of learning insists on the idea of environments (think of the success of the notion of “learning environments”). Indeed, in an Arendtian view, only at the level of political existence is the world—as fabricated through work, by making it durable and, thus, setting it free from the never-ending cycle of bare life—turned into a human world, insofar as it becomes a public space

where human beings, through words and actions, manifest themselves in their uniqueness and freedom.

For Arendt taking initiative is a most significant manifestation of the human ability to introduce the new into the world and is mainly connected with the domain of political life as the realm of *action*. Not surprisingly, it is to this facet of Arendt's analysis that Biesta turns when wanting to pinpoint a space for education beyond learning. Indeed, along with *qualification* and *socialization*,⁹ Biesta identifies a third purpose for education, namely subjectification, which he construes in Arendtian terms:¹⁰ "To be a subject means to act, and action begins with bringing one's beginnings into the world. The point is, however, that in order to act, in order to *be* a subject, we need others who respond to our beginnings. If I would begin something, but no one would respond, nothing would follow from my initiative, and, as a result, my beginnings would not come into the world and I would not *be* a subject. *I* would not come into the world."¹¹ Subjectivity is not something that pre-exists to action; it is not an "attribute of an individual but is understood as a quality of human interaction."¹² As a consequence, schools should not be merely sites where the youth get qualified or socialized but also places in which they can act and, thus, manifest their subjectivity and come into the world.

Biesta speaks in this context of action-centered education. In his most recent production, however, he prefers to speak of world-centered education, which helps the youth to avoid the extremes of self-destruction and world-destruction.¹³ Making its way through these two poles, education as subjectification seems to appeal to more than a balance between the self and the world. Rather it seems to invite us to discover the original bond between the self and the world. In this perspective, I suggest complementing Masschelein and Biesta with some insights from the philosophy of history of Jan Patočka, who, elaborating on Arendt's phenomenology of the active life, will introduce us to a set of ideas, which can be serviceable to salvage education from the world-consuming dynamics of the learning society. In particular, we will be able to identify how deeply in the very history of Western tradition the "pedagogical movement" (in a specific meaning of the expression) is inscribed.

THE CARE OF THE SOUL AND THE GREEK INVENTION OF “PEDAGOGY”

The starting point of Patočka’s search is the “natural world” understood as “the world prior to the discovery of its problematic character,” which is the world that has not yet experienced the ‘concealment.’¹⁴ This latter word has to be read through a Heideggerian lens. Indeed, it does not mean that in the natural world there does not exist any mystery or anything sacred, but there has not been “the experience of the transition, of the emergence of what-is as phenomenon out of obscurity into the openness ...”¹⁵ This is the experience of the *aletheia* as un-concealment. The natural world is pre-problematic in the sense that it has a pre-given meaning, and Patočka suggests exploring it by drawing upon Arendt’s inquiries into labor, that is, into that kind of activity which is chained to bare life and “continuous with the problematic character of life while at the same time obscuring and preventing us from seeing it.”¹⁶

The natural world of labor has its embryonic unit in “the household, the community of those who work to assure their sustenance ...”¹⁷ Patočka complements Arendt’s analysis with a tripartition of his own, by distinguishing three fundamental movements of human life, namely the movements of acceptance, defense and truth. The first “consists in the human need to be accepted and introduced into the world, since the human entry into the realm of open, individuated being has the character of something prepared and fitted together ...”¹⁸ By defense Patočka means the movement through which we, by working, preserve and reproduce our lives. These two movements belong to the domain of the household,¹⁹ in which truth is captured, only not-thematically: “[I]t is characteristic of humans before history that they understand their entire life in terms of something like an ontological metaphor ... For them, what-is and being, phenomena and the movement of their manifestation, converge on a single plane, reminiscent of the language of poetic metaphor ...”²⁰ In this natural world of the household, the movement of truth is, thus, subordinated to the other two movements.

It is only with the emergence of political life in the Greek meaning of the word, that is, as the space for human action and, therefore, as a specific kind

of human interaction sustained by freedom, that the movement of truth properly appears. With Arendtian accents Patočka argues that “[f]rom that moment on this life is essentially and in its very being distinct from life in acceptance; here life is not received as complete as it is, but rather transforms itself from the start – it is a *reaching forth*. ... Political life as life in an urgent time, *in a time to ...* this constant vigilance is at the same time a permanent uprootedness, lack of foundation.”²¹ It is here that philosophical inquiry as a radical examination of life and a quest for a meaning that is no longer pre-given arises:

[T]his discovering of meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence, as a new project of life, is the meaning of Socrates’s existence. The constant shaking of the naive sense of meaningfulness is itself a new mode of meaning, a discovery of its continuity with the mysteriousness of being and what-is as a whole. ... Perhaps the inmost nature of that rupture ... lies in that shaking of the naive certainty of meaning which governs the life of humankind up to that specific transformation which represents a nearly simultaneous – and in a more profound sense really unitary – origin of politics and philosophy.²²

We are here at the very core of Patočka’s view; indeed, Socrates’s care of the soul is the domain in which the movement of truth comes into its own: “Care for the soul means that truth is something not given once and for all, nor merely a matter of observing and acknowledging the observed, but rather a lifelong inquiry, a self-controlling, self-unifying intellectual and vital practice.”²³ The “philosophical ideal of a life in truth,”²⁴ consists in making the “looking-in,” the “insight,”²⁵ the axis around which to build a life worth living. In this perspective, the movement of truth is no longer subordinated to the other two movements but rather re-signifies them.

If Arendt emphasizes the passage from the realm of the household to political life, and Patočka, in her wake, lays a stress upon the philosophical ideal of life in truth through the care of the soul as what emerges from the life in the *polis*, I would like to illuminate a point which remains undeveloped

in their reflection: *this passage is intimately connected with the discovery of education as something which is more than mere socialization*. This passage was the invention of “pedagogy”: etymologically, in the ancient Athens, the pedagogue was the one that accompanied the young from the house to the school, the gymnasium, etc., that is, to public (educational) places. Playing just a little on this etymology, we can say that “pedagogy” names originally the passage from the household to the public domain, that passage which is central in the reflections of Arendt and Patočka, who, however, tend to underestimate the relevance of this “pedagogical” moment.

It is possible to put it in a way that combines Heidegger and Patočka. In his *Platons Lehre der Wahrheit*,²⁶ Heidegger extrapolates three ideas about *paideia* (education) from Plato’s *Republic*:

1. *Paideia* is *hē ēmetera phusis*, our own nature, that is, in the reading here proposed, ‘educated’ human beings emerge from nature into a domain which is their own, by not remaining chained exclusively to the mere dynamics of the cycle of life and its reproduction-preservation (the movements of acceptance and defense);
2. *Paideia* consists in a *passage from apaideusia* (the lack of *paideia*) to *paideia* but, at the same time, “it constantly refers to the lack of *paideia*.”²⁷ I would suggest interpreting this specification, on the one hand, in the sense that the movement of truth as education does not institute a new domain disconnected from and replacing the other two movements but rather it re-orientes them; on the other, in the sense that somehow the movement of education cannot but react to the grip of the other two and operate as a renewal of life, in the strongest meaning according to which the newness comes into the world as never before. (Patočka would say that, when the other two movements obtain, the care is all about the *immortality* in the biological acceptance of the preservation of the human species, whereas the care of the soul discloses the domain of the inquiry into the meaning of one’s destiny and into one’s freedom and responsibility, without, however, any individualistic overtones.);

3. *Paideia* is *periagōghē holes tēs psukhēs*, an overturning/re-orientation of the whole soul, or, as Heidegger suggests translating it, of our whole being-in-the world.

In a nutshell, we can say that *paideia* should be construed as that specific movement of education which goes beyond mere socialization and which, thus, is co-extensive with the movement of truth as the movement of world-disclosure. This could be the gist of Heidegger's statement about an original co-belonging of the essence of *paideia* and the essence of *alētheia*.²⁸ To refer to the aforementioned statement of Patočka about the "really unitary origin of politics and philosophy,"²⁹ we should complement it by saying that "pedagogy" *qua* the movement of education, in the specific meaning here introduced, should be aligned with politics and philosophy.

However, while a comparison with Heidegger's tenets could help us to clarify Patočka's insights, we cannot overlook the differences. In Heidegger's reading of Plato's allegory of the cave the emphasis is laid on the change in the regime of truth that is therein accomplished, from truth as *alētheia* (un-concealment) to truth as *orthotēs* (as the adequacy of the gaze and, therefore, the forerunner of the Western view of truth as correspondence). While the cave is the symbolic embodiment of the notion of un-concealment, the notion of *idea* (and the metaphor of the Sun in the allegory) prepares the way to the other regime of truth, dominating the entire metaphysical tradition. In contrast, Patočka does not consider the discourse about the *idea* as the inauguration of metaphysics since he takes the "idea" to be not an object or an entity but rather "the pure superobjective call of transcendence"³⁰ and a "deobjectifying power,"³¹ that is, a name for the experience of freedom as the disengagement from the limitations of the natural world. In his great project, named "negative Platonism," Patočka ascribed to Socrates the merit of having brought to maturation this thought, while the fault of Plato was to re-objectify the idea and replace the movement of truth (which is the "negative" movement of freeing oneself from our enchainment to the cycle of bare life) with the fatal conceit of accessing (and taking hold of) a domain of ideal objects. In this sense, while Heidegger refers back to the pre-Socratics in order to escape metaphysics, Patočka invites us to

rediscover the lesson of Socrates as the culmination of the pre-metaphysical and, therefore, genuinely philosophical era, insofar as he brought to completion the revolution (*periagoghē*) of the soul as the condition for the emergence of the movement of truth, which is at the very origin of politics and philosophy (and “pedagogy,” in the reading here offered).

In a university course entirely dedicated to Socrates (still unpublished in English),³² Patočka shows how in Socrates the soul acquires a new meaning, it becomes “the bearer of fate,” it “decides for itself and, to achieve this goal, it has a power which is its alone – namely the recognition of truth, the strength of distinguishing between good and evil.”³³ The soul needed to be cared for because both the many who, in their natural way of living, thought that they already knew how to live and the few more talented young in Athens, who indulged in an “hypertrophy of the I” or in a “false individualism,”³⁴ were convinced that they already knew the criteria to which to inspire their lives. By contrast, Socrates discovered life as a questioning and as a problem. This is the core of his irony: “[He], on the one hand, is present in the same moral world inhabited by the others – he too knows its measures and its concepts, knows this life, and is filled with it; on the other, however, his philosophical idea has urged him to give all these concepts another meaning, to see behind them another dimension in comparison with the one in which the others move.”³⁵

Discovering life as a question, Socrates interrupts the grip of the natural world and opens up the space for the interrogation about the manifesting of phenomena. Thus, he invites all to live in truth, that is, in “a proper relation to manifestation as such – that is, to that which makes manifestation possible.”³⁶ In the phenomenological vocabulary which belongs to Patočka this is the relationship to the world *qua* world, as the horizon of any experience of beings as phenomena. In this view, the movement of education is a “worldward” movement; it is the movement which dis-closes the world and enables human beings not to live any longer (only) in the environment-like sphere of the reproduction of life.

In the part of his course in which he reconstructs Socrates’s life, Patočka establishes an interesting distinction between two periods and two kinds of circles in which Socrates “taught.”³⁷ In the first period, the circle of Socrates’s

audience is composed of his *betaíroi*, his friends, his fellows, people who gathered around him because they saw in his teaching a defense of the classic Attic heritage and a bastion against rampant individualism. These friends tended to miss the novelty of the Socratic approach and to take him as the propagator of a set of traditional teachings. They could not get the revolutionary meaning of the knowing of not knowing. Instead, Socrates increasingly realized that reclaiming the traditional ethos of the polis was not sufficient and that the care for the polis was predicated upon a care of one's soul to be realized through an incessant questioning. In this undertaking, Socrates turned to the youth, who represented his second educational circle. With them Socrates's insistence on the care of the soul acquired a new ring: it was an appeal to an awakening, to the channeling of the powerful thymotic and erotic energies (think of Alcibiades) towards a renovation of ethical-political existence (it is in this light that I would suggest reading also Patočka's inspiring reflection on courage and *thumos* as "an overcoming of bare life" and as an "exposing [of oneself] to peril," a point on which I cannot expatiate here³⁸).

I would construe (admittedly in an idiosyncratic way) this distinction as if, in the life of Socrates itself, there was a progression from socialization to what we could venture to call education as subjectification and that this passage was co-extensive with the increasing role that the appeal to the care of the soul acquired. In this interpretation, it is not by chance that Socrates increasingly engages with the youth and, moreover, the more talented; indeed, he seems to be aware that there is a "virtuous" circuit between the willingness to take initiative (and to let the new emerge in the world), of which the youth are in some respect a "figure," and the manifestation of the problematic character of life and the need for questioning and examining in order to have a life worth living. As long as the youth are considered only as the 'carriers' of the life of the community as it has always been, that is, as the replicators of the past, no problematic character can come into the light of the day—and *vice versa*. In other words, while Patočka does not draw this conclusion and would probably think of the change in education as derivative from the caesura represented by political and philosophical existence, I would tend to suggest that philosophy

and education as ‘subjectification’ emerged in a twin birth as two manifestations of the worldward movement of truth.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In speaking of “subjectification” to mark the “Socratic revolution” (understood also as the “pedagogical invention”) I am not insinuating that Biesta’s view of it overlaps with the notion of the care of the soul (for a series of reasons which cannot be investigated here). Nor can I discuss the (possible) affinity between Biesta’s understanding of the movement beyond learning as an effort “to overcome the humanist foundations of modern education”³⁹ and Patočka’s “negative Platonism” and his re-discovery of the Socratic care of the soul as countering the “integral humanism” emerging at the end of metaphysics.⁴⁰ However, I would like to suggest that Biesta, in his tripartition of education as qualification, socialization, and subjectification, has forcefully captured a general trait of the meaning of education, independently from the specific ways in which he construes these three facets. In particular, this tripartition helps us to see that what is properly educational in education comes to the fore only insofar as we do not remain on the level of qualification and socialization. In the reading here provided, which complements the Arendtian matrix of Biesta with an argument inspired by Patočka, this understanding is rooted in the very beginning of Western history (prior to the Platonic-metaphysical hijacking), when the question of truth (and the truth as question) were unconcealed as a movement distinct from acceptance and defense; and this occurred with Socrates’s discovery of the care for the soul, which he pursued mostly in his relationship with the youth, that is, the potential bearers of the new. Socrates understood that the space of the *polis* inflected the question of generational continuity in new ways; indeed it let generational continuity emerge as a question. In the evocative words of Patočka, elaborating on Arendt’s motifs, in the political domain “life does not stand on the firm ground of generative continuity, it is not backed by the dark earth, but only by darkness, that is, it is ever *confronted* by its finitude and the permanent precariousness of life. Only by coming to terms with this threat, confronting it undaunted, can free life as such unfold ...”⁴¹ The Socratic care

for the soul is the conscious cultivation of this kind of freedom.

On the other hand, the Patočkian-Socratic interpretation here advanced could be seen also as a complement to the constructive part of Masschelein's educational theory. Indeed, in his most recent work, the Belgian scholar has undertaken a powerful reflection (together with Maarten Simons) on the "scholastic,"⁴² on what makes the school something different from a learning environment (and, as argued in the first section, the two terms of this phrase intimately co-belong to each other). In many respects, not Socrates but Isocrates is the Greek hero of Masschelein and Simons in this undertaking that focuses on the school as *skholé* and as a place of study. However, I would suggest that it is the Socratic beginning (in the acceptance here introduced) that inaugurates a space for suspension, profanation, attention, and opening up of the world (to mention four main gestures of the school *qua* school according to Masschelein and Simons), by disclosing a domain other than the realms of the acceptance and defense of life (while not being unconnected with them).

There is a sense in which the learning society is an uncanny combination of pre-history and post-history. As a giant household, in which the dynamics of labor obtains, it reverses the emergence of a public domain, which marked for the Czech philosopher the beginning of history. As a manifestation of the techno-scientific civilization, which, in the wake of the Husserl of the *Crisis of European Sciences*, Patočka reads as fundamentally nihilistic, the learning society represents the end of history understood as originating from the world-disclosing movement of truth. As Socrates reinvented the Greek understanding of soul, we are appealed to think of what caring for the soul means in our technological world; or, better, by thinking of what caring for the soul means and, thus, re-juvenating the "worldward" movement of education, we may make something like a technological "world" (in the strong meaning of the word) possible.

1 Jan Masschelein, "The Discourse of the Learning Society and the Loss of Childhood," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 1 (2001): 1-20; Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning. Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).
- 3 Ibid., 7
- 4 Ibid., 99.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit. Gesamte Ausgabe, Band 29/30* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992), 344 ff.
- 6 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 46.
- 7 Masschelein, “The Discourse of the Learning Society and the Loss of Childhood,” 2
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Gert J.J. Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 19.
- 10 Actually, Biesta’s understanding of subjectification combines an Arendtian with a Levinasian strand, but in the present argumentation I will confine myself to the former.
- 11 Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 133.
- 12 Ibid., 137.
- 13 Gert J.J. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 14 Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1996), 12.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 15.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 29-30.
- 19 It is important to note that also the big empires (such as the Assyrian one) were for Patočka only huge households aiming at the preservation of life. It is with the breakthrough represented by the invention of the *polis* and the disclosure of the political domain (in the Arendtian meaning of a space for action) that something new emerged.
- 20 Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 32.
- 21 Ibid., 38
- 22 Ibid., 61
- 23 Ibid., 82
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 See Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- 26 Martin Heidegger, “Platons Lehre der Wahrheit,” in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), 203-238.
- 27 Ibid., 217.
- 28 Ibid., 222.
- 29 Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 61.
- 30 Jan Patočka, *Negativní Platonismus. O vzniku, problematice, zániku metafyziky a otáze, zda filosofie může žít po ní* [Negative Platonism. On the origin, the problematics, and the end of metaphysics and on the possibility of a philosophy after metaphysics], quoted from the bilingual (Czech-Italian) edition: *Platonismo negativo e altri frammenti* (Milano: Bompiani, 2015), 203.
- 31 Ibid., 201.
- 32 For the course of Patočka on Socrates I will refer to the bilingual (Czech-Italian) edition: Jan Patočka, *Socrate* (Milano: Rusconi, 1999).
- 33 Ibid., 353.

34 Ibid., 369.

35 Ibid., 399.

36 Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 33

37 I have put the expression between inverted commas because Socrates claimed that he had taught nobody.

38 Jan Patočka, "L'Europe et Après," in *L'Europe et Après l'Europe* (Paris: Verdier, 2007), 124.

39 Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 4.

40 Patočka, *Negativní Platonismus*, 93.

41 Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 39.

42 Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In the Defence of the School: A Public Issue* (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture & Society Publishers, 2013).