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# Freedom in the Context of Political Power in European Political Thoughts: H. Arendt, J. Patočka a V. Bělohradský

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**Summary:** This text deals with the concept of freedom and its related responsibilities as space while creating the moral dimension of political action. In this context we are analyzed Arendt, Patočka and Bělohradský terms sovereignty, political power, totalitarian system and liberal democracy. Their reflection is guided by a deep respect for the Socratic-Platonic tradition of political thought. Mentioned thinkers also combines their common interest in the phenomenological method. Arendt perceives freedom as the very reason of the existence of politics. Bělohradský repeats Husserl's and Patočka's appeal consisting in the search for the original European legacy, i.e. the return to the last instance of your decision-making – personal conscience.

**Keywords:** freedom, policy, totalitarian system, liberal democracy, phenomenology.

## 1. Hannah Arendt's social ethics

Hannah Arendt learnt the philosophical craft from the masters of her times: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Roman Guardini and Karl Jaspers. As one of the most prominent representatives of political philosophy of the 20th century, she also focused on human behaviour in the social context. Arendt, a Jewish thinker, distinguishes between two types of moral behaviour: contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) and active life (*vita activa*).

Spiritual and moral dispositions, in Arendt's words – the religious character, provide humans with the capability to harmonically combine both these life approaches. In reference to Aurelius Augustinus, she says that a man as the image of God is endowed with the ability to walk the path of knowledge towards his innermost self. At the same time, men should not refuse the political aspect of their nature, actively seeking to serve the human community.

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Arendt claims that action<sup>1</sup> means initiating something new in the sense of creating. In this way, humans are redoing the act of creation, thereby giving rise to something principally new. A man is a being endowed with freedom<sup>2</sup>, which should, similarly as the gift of faith, be accepted as the condition to humanity. Only faith opens the world up to people, consequently causing automatisms of the everyday life to disappear. Like fire, this everyday life eats away the uniqueness of the earthly existence of each of us. An active life is a practical implementation of the expression of love and the miracle capable of changing the routine way of the world, i.e. the expression of human freedom. According to Arendt, the first thinker to draw a connecting line between freedom, love and faith, was Aurelius Augustinus, a man living at the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire and, at the same time, the one who built the foundations of the Christian philosophy and doctrine. He elaborated on the concept of freedom as the freedom to choose, to decide (*liberum arbitrium*). However, Arendt draws more benefit from his

<sup>1</sup> Raised by the hermeneutic etymological approach of her teacher, M. Heidegger, H. Arendt studies etymology of the word to act in Greek. The first one is *archein* – to initiate, guide, but also to rule, and the second one is *prattein*, to manage, accomplish, or do something. Latin equivalents are *agere* – set in motion and *gerere*, translated by Arendt either as withstanding or supporting the continuity of past deeds. This results in historical acts that are called *res gestae*.

In both cases, action takes place in two stages. *Archein* in Greek means acting or ruling, which, at that time, was the privilege of free citizens. Arendt thus equates experience of being free with initiating new things. Rulers were liberated from self-consuming procurement of life needs and could therefore, with others alike, focus on leadership and try to accomplish (*prattein*) a historic deed. Also in Latin, the author discloses a unique connection between *agere* and *gerere*, this time supported by more historical documents. For Romans, the notion of freedom was based on the fact of foundation (*agere*) of Rome, which obliged them to manage, expand and preserve the continuity of tradition (*res gestae*) of the Roman republic. However, Roman writers were unable to come up with such a concept of freedom that would theoretically support their political experience of freedom. Neither the Greeks, according to Arendt, had a clear idea of the relationship between the freedom they described and the philosophically substantiated inner freedom from external desires and the freedom of a citizen of a community.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt even perceives freedom as the very reason of the existence of politics: “*The raison d’être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action. (...) Freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide and are related to each other like two sides of a coin. (...) This is the realm, where freedom is the worldly reality, tangible in words that can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into the great storybook of human history. (...) This, of course, belongs among the fundamental tenets of liberalism which, its name notwithstanding, has done its share to ban is the notion of liberty from the political realm. For politics, according to the same philosophy, must be concerned almost exclusively with the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of its interests. Now, where life is at stake, all action is, by definition, under the sway of necessity. and the proper realm to take care of life’s necessities is the gigantic and still increasing sphere of social and economic life, whose administration has overshadowed the political realm ever since the beginning of the modern age.*” In: ARENDT, Hannah, *The Crisis in Culture*. Praha: Mladá fronta, 1994, pp. 68–79.

theories on freedom seen as an existential characteristic of a human being in the world. Human birth and the revelation of freedom are identical. For Augustinus, humans are free, since they have been created. And this creative beginning recurs whenever a new person is born, who can initiate something new in the world (in Greek *archein*, in Latin *agere*). Arendt finds support for this concept of freedom also in the New Testament. Human power resulting from human freedom comes to its climax not in the will, but in faith.

Faith acts through miracle, which is nothing else than: “*a process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts – that is something which could not be expected.*”<sup>3</sup> Arendt considers the automatisms to be an integral part not only of cosmic and organic, but also of historical processes. The permanent repetition of these natural processes allows for a kind of a scientific insight, the automatism gives rise to new life in the nature, guiding it to an inevitable end. However, Arendt believes that human beings are provided, from time to time, at timely historical moments, with the capacity to interrupt the course of a certain automatism *by action*. Only the very start of these automatisms, the creation of the world and time, is, of course an act of a *miracle*, our whole existence depending on something which safeguards, exceeds and controls the natural flow of things from the invisible background. In this anthropocentric concept of Christianity, Arendt views humans as the only being in the world capable of active participation in the miracle. It is obvious that this entire theory is beyond the scientist’s grasp: “*The very impact of an event is never wholly explicable; its factuality transcends in principle all anticipation. The experience that tells us that events are miracles is neither arbitrary nor sophisticated. It is, on the contrary, most natural and, indeed, in ordinary life almost commonplace. Without this commonplace experience, the part assigned by religion to supernatural miracles would be well-nigh incomprehensible.*”<sup>4</sup>

Arendt believes that the history of European ethical and political thinking saw a fatal shift in the concept of liberty as the very condition of humanity and action, known already to the Greeks, towards freedom of the will in the sense of *being able to want something or control something or someone*. If I find that my will does not suffice for my self-control – meaning the defeat of my weaknesses – then my effort for the implementation of my own freedom is transformed in the desire to control others. Most notably, according to Arendt, this step was most explicit in the bizarre confusion and fusion of three principally different terms: humanity founding freedoms, free will and sovereignty in political philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau. He believes that *state sovereignty* in the sense of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 95.

indivisible power derives from the notion of *general will* representing the free will of each citizen.<sup>5</sup> And this is the biggest mistake of all, since, according to Arendt, the sovereignty of the state and the preservation of human freedom are mutually exclusive: “*The famous sovereignty of political bodies has always been an illusion, which, moreover, can be maintained only by the instruments of violence, that is, with essentially non-political means. Under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously. Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organised groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the ‘general will’ of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.*”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the above-specified *action* there are two other activities providing foundations to the being of humans: work and production. Yet it is only through action and communication that people form free relationships and create a space for mutual self-fulfilment. Free space refuses violence and thus political power is to be perceived as a gift of communicative action, for which violence as an act of “unlove” is always fatal. The modern age dazzled by scientific and technological successes placed far too much emphasis on work and production. This reduced the space for free action and personal responsibility mainly by the effect of bureaucracy, modern technology and mass culture. These are the phenomena that enhance anonymity and a buck-passing approach to life namely in cases when individuals hide behind the mask of state institutions. Arendt believes that the interest in public affairs naturally decreases, opening up the way to totalitarian regimes.

In this context, the following train of thought of Hannah Arendt, who as one of the few world renowned social philosophers or political scientists still holds Plato in esteem: “*We can rise above specialization and philistinism of all sorts to the extent that we learn how to exercise our taste freely. Then we shall know how to reply to those who so frequently tell us that Plato or some other great author of the past has been superseded; we shall be able to understand that even if all criticism of Plato is right, Plato may still be better company than his critics. At any rate, we may remember what the Romans – the first people that*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. for example ROUSSEAU, Jean, Jacques, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*. Prague: Svoboda, 1989, p. 247. “*On this view, we at once see that it can no longer be asked whose business it is to make laws, since they are acts of the general will; nor whether the prince is above the law, since he is a member of the State; nor whether the law can be unjust, since no one is unjust to himself; nor how we can be both free and subject to the laws, since they are but registers of our wills.*”

<sup>6</sup> ARENDT, Hannah, *The Crisis in Culture*. Praha: Mladá fronta, 1994, p.89.

*took culture seriously the way we do – thought a cultivated person ought to be: one who knows how to choose his company among men, among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as in the past.”*<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Patočka’s concept of Europe

As a living amendment to the above-discussed text on contemplating freedom written by Hannah Arendt, comparison with the opinions of two Czech philosophers, Jan Patočka and Václav Bělohradský, come to mind. They represent an attempt to concisely outline some aspects of the genesis of European philosophical-political heritage.

Anthropocentrism, typical for Greek thought, is free of Sumerian theocentric fatalism, Egyptian thanato-centrism, Indian oneness with the universe or the life style of ancient China, seeking harmony in union with natural cycles.

Greek philosophers searched for salvation by grasping the truth through notions, thus allowing for the establishment of the Greek civic society. Historical man emerges by accepting the burden of asking questions. Where the “mythic answer” is made problematic the peculiarity of the fact that “being exists” emerges. We find ourselves on the boundary of the world open to its wholeness and we are set in historical motion. However, if men start posing questions regarding the whole, they can rise above the everyday struggle to provide for their life needs. Patočka believes that the key in history is this openness of humans to events that shatter the everyday course of life.

Greece is also still too much in thrall of the temporalization through *chronos* (mechanical repetition of the individual *present moments*). Christianity introduces *kairos*: time, in which things ripen, and the dimension of the future and development takes over.

Socrates’s requirement to define notions awakened by the voice of consciousness (daimonion) thus teams up with Christian eschatology.

*European historicity*, in Patočka’s terms, stems from the care for the soul as seen by Socrates and Plato terms that reveals *freedom* to men (facilitated by the present relationship to the past in view of the future), which is inseparable from (if not identical with) *responsibility*.

Jacques Derrida interprets Patočka’s concept of history from the *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History* as a genealogy of responsibility, which consists in the conversion of three mysteries. Orgiastic mystery (the demonic, esoteric and the sexual) in itself contains Platonism as the embodiment (incorporation)

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.152.

which is subordinated, subjected and disciplined by orgiastic revelry. Christianity exposes men to the fearful mystery (*mysterium tremendum*) and, at the same time, thanks to the infinite resolution of God-man, life is accepted as a gift. Man becomes a person, who in the ultimate decision-making process, does not relate to Plato's idea of Goodness, albeit the noblest of all ideas. It becomes the internal relationship with infinite love that makes it clear that the person is free and, at the same time, responsible as being guilty due to general sin. "*This transition from externality to inwardness, but also the attainable to the unattainable is the transition from Platonism to Christianity.*"<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, we can only make sense of the genealogy of European responsibility if related to the present. Patočka rightly speaks of whether today "*historical man still wants to acknowledge history*"<sup>9</sup>. This is the aim of an essay entitled "Is Technical Civilization Decadent, and Why?" Aside from marvellous positive properties and the destructive impact on nature, technology also has the capability of unification and neutralization. Therefore, it necessarily results in indifference and boredom, thus bringing back the demonic. Technical civilization is characterized by sexual charge, fascination by aesthetics and, above all, the individualism heralded in a way in Nietzsche's work. Yet not personal individualism, but *roles and tasks*, each individual engaged in the operation of the disorganized planetary monster *is to play and fulfil*. Patočka perceives this as the climax of the metaphysics of power, seizing everything that can be taken. Knowledge has long lost its contemplative or moral dimension. In an unforeseen manner, applied mathematics intensifies the impact of men on the particulars – in which men then get lost and escape their own selves and the world outside.

Phenomenological philosophy of Patočka's interpretation has lead into a life of truth. The truth, however, is not the traditional importance as a statement of compliance with the object. Living in truth rather stems from man's readiness to open oneself to giving the sense of phenomenon.

Concussion sense in the modern era is evident however, does not lead to moral reap, but is obscured. Metaphysical world, as it has been objectified (and must be) informed by science modern man, wholly absorbed in things and primitive narcissism refuses. In an ideal world, God, good or Existence can not calculate. But it is precisely the impossibility of calculation with this not-being lone man invites forfeited negative nihilism to grasp the positive in the present uncertainty, the appeal is heard in the whole world.

<sup>8</sup> DERRIDA, Jacques, Mystery, Heresy and Responsibility: Europe according to Patočka. *Filosofický časopis*, 1992, Vol. XL, no. 4, p. 555.

<sup>9</sup> PATOČKA, Jan, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1990, p. 126.

Justice (if not perceived only as retribution for the wrongs of the past and a tendency towards gender rising up out of envy) about the victim (unless self-sacrifice simply trade with a view to “better future”) are – if they are to have a genuinely ontological dimension – a prerequisite for responsible of relating to personal existence that respect for one’s neighbor, and is also responsible “for public affairs”.

According to Patocka nor a man of liberal democracy is not possible to fully recognize the moral foundation of life in our essential negativity (pure consciousness and its intentional sense of giving the present givens) and runs to the irresponsible development of the will to power (that wants everything to discover that there is nothing and all living things be eliminated from the planet) supported by the natural human rights. Certainly not in principle no objection rights enshrined in human nature. If, however, remains the right (freedom) alone, if left without any obligation (responsibility), Western civilization itself wrest from its origin.

Patocka is convinced that the task of the philosopher is to care for the soul. Platonic philosophy, which is very struggling, she also finally had to bring to the knowledge of the care of the soul (*epimeleia tés psýchés*) is taken into care of my own death (*méleté thanatu*). This care is clearly reflected in three aspects. In a first aspect, cosmological, which can not go here more depth encompasses the whole of it as being static movement acting. In terms of the doctrine of State makes his eventual transformation of the soul: “The village itself is still passionate intellectual movement of their members; and even prominent case in which you can use variations of the famous *Opsis tón adélon ta fainomena* (‘phenomena enable us to see what is not manifested’) – cf. H. Diels (W. Kranz – cit. d., Anaxagoras, B 21a) subtract the structure of the soul, which is the individual’s hard to decipher.”<sup>10</sup>

We can say that the structure and dynamics of the village is a projection of our own souls. What we seem to dislike its laws and institutions are in their origin of our own unresolved and sometimes unacknowledged motivation. The state is secular Total souls, and their merciless mirror. It is to foster the harmonious balance of all structures in the whole, because the soul is ripe if it is balanced in all its parts. For general sense, the soul of its own destiny in accordance with the Socratic-Platonic tradition, which phenomenologist Patocka reflects his personal example. It is obvious that the issue of statehood is not primarily an economic question, but it’s a moral issue, a question relating to personal freedom and responsibility. To be tilted own soul is to self-surrender to the mystery of whole world. In terms of municipalities, then it means forget about self-assertion, for

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<sup>10</sup> PATOČKA, Jan, *Evropa a doba poevropská*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1990, p.75.

manifesting their own volition. Being a politician in the strict sense would mortify all your wishes and desires. The victim whole, however, is only capable of extremely ready, really ready to die.

Even so drastic action may be brought on those who would own limited human freedom surrendered in the service spirit. The third aspect of the care of the soul is finally mastering oneself. Man your uncertainty and insecurity in the world compensates for the effort to control the external physical world and others – a common political practice. Who wants to talk about governance, you must first truly conquer itself: to achieve its center, the immobility of his soul that nothing is required and only them. Then the person as a citizen possibly can begin with an explicit projection of his soul into the image of the municipality.

### **3. Bělohradský's Concept of the Crisis of Technical Age in Europe**

Václav Bělohradský is a prominent Czech thinker, who managed to integrate perspective elements of phenomenological investigation of the natural world by Edmund Husserl and Jan Patočka into his concept of modern society seventies and eighties. In his extensive essay *The Crisis of the Eschatology of the Impersonal* (1982) he attempts to apply the political philosophical legacy of the late works by Patočka from the perspective of an exile author. The spirit of this work by Bělohradský is supported by the critique of the occurrence of the gap between personal awareness, responsibility and estranged state and bureaucratic power.

This gap first opened through Machiavelli's definition of the absolute state, which, in order to keep the internal peace, has to eliminate each attempt to proclaim personal awareness as general awareness, since state power has to be unbiased, i.e. impersonal. Absolute power as a means of protection against religious wars in the theory of Thomas Hobbes only confirms this idea: *"Religious belief presents the potential for a civil war, as it requires a sort of adamance, which poses a threat to the peace among the members of the community. This situation can only be resolved by transferring the competences to formulate and exercise laws from all individuals to the 'ruler' and, at the same time, binding them to absolute obedience of the laws formulated by the ruler. Personal opinions have no political impact. The legitimacy of power and legality of power are identical. This reduction of consciousness to something private is a rational condition to the existence of the state, thus also of civic peace."*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> BĚLOHRADSKÝ, Václav, *A Critique of the Eschatology of Impersonality*. London: Rozmluvy, 1982, p. 30.



Enlightenment eliminates such dualism of the private belief, which stems from morality and an absolute state governed by the eschatology of the impersonal, as each political act is simultaneously seen as an ethical one. However, state power identified as identical with the moral law thus becomes even more dangerous. Rousseau's effort to build a sovereign state founded on the general will was a portent of a people's state. This "bastard" actually brings unlimited power to "the authorized", who understand "commands of the general will", while again underestimating the conscience of an individual.

The enlightenment effort to unite politics and ethics forms the cornerstone of modern ideologies, the inability to keep the difference between state power and personal conscience, i.e. between legality and legitimacy. Its outcome in the form of revolutionary dictatorships, Nazism and communism, is therefore a direct consequence of this uncontrollable identification of the state with its historical and messianic function.

This suffices in regard to totalitarian democracy, whose genealogy was followed in Bělohradský's text. On the other hand, *liberal* democracy does not become legitimate on the basis of any sovereign general will in the form of ideology, but through Locke's empiricism, which justifies political institutions, providing them with legitimate power from the individual will demonstrated in preference of potential future political decision-making tendencies. The participation of all citizens in political power is unfeasible, resulting in the necessary compromise of delegating the power to representatives of private interests.

However, liberal democracy entails the risk of such an autonomy of political parties as a result of technical progress and specialization that their contact with the electorate will again become redundant because, simply put, they only have a limited access to information. Here Bělohradský repeats Husserl's and Patočka's appeal consisting in the search for the original European legacy, i.e. the return to the last instance of your decision-making – personal conscience. There is no other protection against the central process in the development of modern state, which consists in a continuous increase of rationalization expanding across bureaucratic apparatuses and institutions to each individual and following each of their steps from birth until death. Bělohradský considers nihilism of our century predicted by Nietzsche: "*... to be the line running through the entire Western history from Plato to socialism; state is the instrument of this subordination of men and their earthly world to the 'world beyond', objective world, and this subordination took on a technical form, the form of manipulation of impersonal laws. Nihilism is the expansion of the impersonal. The new form of innocence of power therefore derives from the idea of technical neutrality of impersonal power with regard to opinions and morality.*"<sup>12</sup> The effort

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

of the dissidents is not aimed at anything else than the restoration of personal conscience capable of turning power into guilt.

After describing the crisis of the modern state – not only totalitarian, but also liberal, since the totalitarian state is only a monstrous mirror of the “free Western society”, Bělohradský attempts to identify the origin of the European legacy. His analysis distinctly shows the elements of the phenomenological theory of Husserl modified by Heidegger’s concept of historicity. This consists in the autonomy of human consciousness, which is an Israeli-Greek heritage.

European legacy is characterized by the diarchy between the personal consciousness and institutions. The roots of this diarchy have to be tracked back to the Israeli prophet as the bearer of consciousness whose visions are then articulated for the community by an institutional priest. The situation in Greece is similar: the universal order of the existing things comprehensible by an individual reason corresponds to the law in the *polis*. Crisis in the society therefore arises, if this autonomous fundamental element is absorbed by the institutional one. It is necessary to maintain the balance of these two elements – legitimacy (natural experience of an individual) and legality (institution, law). “*Patočka’s question ‘whether historical man still wants to acknowledge history’, is related to the very possibility of overcoming the decline of Europe, which implies the need to accept the burden of diarchy that will never allow us to escape from any action and to resort to the innocence of everyday life. Therefore it applies that ‘the law is the law’.*”<sup>13</sup>

Bělohradský’s essay also addresses the sources of legitimacy. The primary source is Socrates, who views human liberties as the possibility of acting naturally based on one’s own definitions of notions. He also draws on the Christian announcement of God’s kingdom, which endows citizens with a more liberal relationship to political power. Finally, the legitimacy is granted through primary human sympathy – the ability to stay in harmony with others, an essential condition for any community.

Bělohradský also does justice to legality and defines its functions that are supposed to guarantee the rights of individuals by limiting and determining the behaviour of others: 1. by canonizing religious texts, i.e. institutionalizing those original religious experiences through the mediation of the prophets (stratification of the society), 2. rational formulation of the laws regulated by the apparatus guaranteeing the distance between the personal consciousness and the role as the “embodiment of the law” and the impartiality and general character of these laws.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 49

## 4. Conclusion

As a living amendment to the above-discussed text on contemplating freedom written by Hannah Arendt, comparison with the opinions of two Czech philosophers, Jan Patočka and Václav Bělohradský, come to mind. They represent an attempt to concisely outline some aspects of the genesis of European philosophical-political heritage. The philosophical outreach of Patočka's phenomenology is far too deep to be fully explained for example by the programme manifesto of Charter 77. The author therefore inclines to the opinion of Pavel Rezek's in his work *Philosophy and politics of kitsch*, stating that the dissidents' quest for "life in truth" was rather a willingness to live in conflict. What is then dateless in Patočka? It certainly is the genuine mergence of Heideggerian phenomenology and the Greek philosophical maxim, which is care for children. This care gives the European civilisation the necessity of permanent finding itself in a crisis. Europe and her legacy have undoubtedly been undergoing a fateful period. Yet, it would be interesting if true came Patočka's words on future unique position of East-European countries which will march in the front of protection of the best traditions of the European spirit, for it is them who experienced the cathartic bath of suffering.