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Patočka on Bare Life and Political Life in the Time of the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Jan Patočka devoted many of his writings to diagnosing the modern condition as an all-encompassing 'technoscientific' framework, one that reduces living to a bare life which can be calculated and controlled. In this article, I examine how this framework acts to foreclose the possibility of genuine political life, a life of openness that works against totalizing structures and modes of thought. I show how Patočka's phenomenological distinction between bare life and political life, together with Foucault's insights into biopolitics, can be used to better understand public health policy during COVID-19 and to raise critical questions about the direction of post-pandemic society.

KEYWORDS
Jan Patočka; COVID-19; biopolitics; foucault; phenomenology; Agamben

Introduction

There are obvious reasons why the name of the 'heretical' philosopher Jan Patočka might be invoked in connection to totalitarianism. It was under the totalitarian regime in Communist Czechoslovakia that Patočka was banned from teaching and publishing for most of his life, becoming, in his own words, 'taboo'.[1] He also lived through the Nazi occupation of the country in the 1940s, briefly assigned to forced labour digging a railway tunnel in Prague. Patočka was more than simply a critic (and victim), of the brutal Nazi and Communist regimes he lived under. His analysis of totalitarianism is particularly relevant for those living in societies that are not obviously or overtly totalitarian, in which citizens understand themselves to be free in a meaningful, if limited, way. In his late *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Patočka insists that the real question 'is not at issue between liberalism and socialism, between democracy and totalitarianism, which for all their profound differences overlook all that is neither objective nor a role'.[2] To understand what is really at stake in political life requires an understanding of the shared ideological and metaphysical ground of both modern democracies and totalitarian governments: for Patočka, both forms of government have adopted a 'technoscientific' framework that regards life as merely the opposite of

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[1] Letter from Jan Patočka to Krzysztof Michalski, 11 April 1973, in Ludger Hagedorn and James Dodd (eds), 'Religion, War, and the Crisis of Modernity. A Special Issue Dedicated to the Philosophy of Jan Patočka', *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 14 (2015): 224.

[2] Erazim Kohak & James Dodd (eds), *Jan Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1996), 115.

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death. Patočka's phenomenological analysis of this commonality between totalitarianism and liberalism shows the limitations of standard debates around state power, rights, security and uncertainty, in the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

In his later writings Patočka defined our era as a planetary 'supercivilisation' governed by a 'technoscientific' and 'biologistic' framework that sees the whole of existence as the object of calculation, management, and control. The discussions in which these terms figure are striking for their relevance to contemporary debates: from the universalization of a scientific conception of the world, to the dominance of mathematical models and algorithms to the increasing hegemony of a technical intelligentsia.[3] To understand the full import of any one of these ideas, either their place within Patočka's philosophy or their value as conceptual tools to analyse contemporary life, would require a much more comprehensive study that I can offer here. Thankfully, excellent work has been done by on these topics in existing anglophone and European scholarship.[4]

My own focus in what follows is Patočka's analysis of how the totalizing framework of modernity works to prevent genuine political life and to obscure questions about the stakes of life and death. I will begin with a discission of the phenomenology of political life in Patočka to highlight his continuing relevance to non-communist societies. My focus in the latter part of the article will be on Patočka's notion of mere life or biologism as distinct from political life. I will examine how that distinction, together with Foucault's related account of a biopolitics of 'making live and letting die' and Agamben's 'bare life' can be used to better understand public health policy during COVID-19 and to raise critical questions about what it means to 'save lives'.

A Phenomenology of Political Life

Much of Patočka's work concerns the question of what gives meaning to life, of a 'that for the sake of which' around which a human life could be oriented. In his account, such a value cannot be instrumental or particular, on par with the values that organize everyday life, but is necessarily absolute and global, albeit open and undefined.[5] Patočka's commitment to a meaning beyond the realm of available things and instrumental goods – a commitment he describes with the ancient Greek term 'care for the soul' – inspired his participation, along with other dissidents, in Charter '77, calling for the Czechoslovak government to affirm the human rights principles it had agreed to at the Helsinki Accords of 1975. The story of Patočka's death is well-known: the ailing philosopher, just shy of his seventieth birthday, died of a brain haemorrhage after a series of lengthy secret police interrogations. Years later, the boundaries of the possible in his native country shifted: the Velvet Revolution was hailed as a success, and Václav Havel, an admirer of Patočka, became the first democratically elected president of an independent Czechoslovakia and, subsequently, of the Czech Republic.

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[3] See L'ubica Učník, 'The Allure and impossibility of an algorithmic future: a lesson from Patočka's supercivilization,' *Studies in East European Thought* 73 (2021): 249–270; L'ubica Učník, Ivan Chvatík, & Anita Williams (eds), *The Phenomenological Critique of Mathematisation and the Question of Responsibility: Formalisation and the Life-World* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015); Anita Williams, 'The Meaning of the Mathematical' in Učník, Chvatík, & Williams (eds), *Asubjective Phenomenology: Jan Patočka's Project in the Broader Context of His Work* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2015), 227–52.

[4] See, for example, Francesco Tava and Darian Meacham, *Thinking After Europe: Jan Patočka and Politics* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

[5] See the third essay 'Does History Have a Meaning' in *Patočka, Heretical Essays*, 53–78.

Had Patočka lived to see these events, he no doubt would have welcomed them as progress. Yet he would not have regarded the transition to a democratic system of government as a good in itself. The project of democracy, as Patočka understood it, is ongoing and precarious, in no way assured by democratic elections, free speech, the right of assembly, or any of the other rights guaranteed to citizens of democratic countries. It is not democracy *per se* but authentic ‘political life’ that Patočka is concerned with, even though the founding moment of political life in his work is Athenian democracy. Patočka’s conception of the political, echoing Hannah Arendt,[6] is linked to a philosophical position of openness towards, rather than fear or denial of, that which unsettles. The public space of politics manifests the willingness to question what the human project is and should be, in contrast to what Patočka deems ‘prehistoric’ life, which accepts the given meaning of human being and attempts to preserve it for the next generation.[7] In caring for the *polis*, by contrast, human beings open themselves to an ‘unsheltered life’[8] that is ‘risky’ and ‘dangerous’.[9] Patočka speaks in many of his late texts about the meaning and stakes of the political, In ‘An Outline of History’ (1975–6):

> There is in it [philosophy] a freedom of human being towards what is, that replaced the former integration [into what is] and subordination [to what is]. But such a freedom contained concrete possibilities, the foremost of which was perhaps that of the construction of a political public space, a space not for the necessities of life but for rising above them.[10]

In this excerpt, Patočka describes his three movements of existence – broadly, three ways in which human beings can relate to their environment. It is only with the third movement, that of freedom, that politics in the sense Patočka understands it becomes possible. In this context, he offers one of his key distinctions: given life and its exigencies on the one hand and political life the other. This distinction is not based on social or economic privilege, i.e. the idea that politics requires a certain amount of leisure and removal from the cares of daily life, such that the average worker is excluded from the genuine political sphere. Nor does it regard politics as operating *within* the wider sphere of the pragmatic management of life. Instead, it is a space for ‘rising above’ such management.

Patočka understands human being as a kind of movement, ‘an openness for oneself and for things’.[11] This openness is manifested by the human interest in things: by the way we relate to and question our own being and being as such. It is a fundamental principle of Patočka’s philosophy that human being relates to what there is, rather than relating merely to representations or conceptual constructs that make the world into an object of thought for the subject. For much of human history, what Patočka calls prehistory, human beings did not fully express this openness because they were occupied with the necessities of life carried out through ‘enforced toil’ or labour.[12] The ‘firm ground of generative continuity'[13] provides the horizon for such activity, a harbour or shelter against total precarity. It is important to note that even within the prehistoric, Patočka does not present humankind as living a merely animal existence or natural existence, declaring 'Humans cannot *be with the spontaneity* of nonhuman existents; they must *accomplish* their life, must *lead* it; they must "be done with it", "come to terms" with it'.[14] An interest in what is, and the opening outwards that accompanies this interest, is always present in some form, even if that form is centred on acceptance and preservation rather than a celebration of uncertainty.

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[6] Patočka read and admired Arendt’s philosophy, and her influence on his conception of history and politics is particularly apparent in the *Heretical Essays*.

[7] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 29.

[8] Ibid., 39.

[9] Ibid., 63.

[10] Jan Patočka, ‘An Outline of History’ in Ivan Chvatík and Erin Plunkett (eds), *The Selected Writings of Jan Patočka: Care for the Soul* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 308.

[11] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 27. For an extended treatment of existence as movement in Patočka’s work, see Renaud Barbaras, *Le mouvement de l’existence. Études sur la phénoménologie de Jan Patočka* (Éditions de la Transparence, 2007).

[12] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 38.

The political, by contrast to the prehistorical, is a seeking out and an 'intensification' of the open and problematic nature of existence:

> in acting politically humans expose themselves to the problematic nature of action whose consequences are unpredictable and whose initiative soon passes into other hands, so in philosophy humans expose themselves to the problematic being and meaning of what there is.[15]

This problematicity is a reference to the fact that 'the being and meaning of what there is' is an open question. What is at stake in the political is not only the meaning of human being and human action but also the meaning of being as a whole. Patočka rejects a materialist, (for him) nihilistic understanding in which human beings project meaning onto an essentially meaningless universe; such a claim presupposes the nature of being as that which is available to scientific analysis and is therefore outside of the realm of value.[16]

Instead, the various ways in which human beings seek out meaning are for Patočka grounded in our essentially open relationship to the world, an insight comparable to Heidegger's concept in *Being and Time*, (expressed by Dasein), of *the being for which being is at issue*. For Patočka, political life is the form of life that most fully reflects this relationship to being, as well as the open nature of being itself, which 'can never be explained as a thing, which cannot be mastered, delimited, grasped positively, and dominated, but which is present only in the *seeking* of being'.[17] As noted above, meaning attaches to the whole of being, rather than only to particular situations or contexts. However, it does not have a closed or determinate structure: It is present in seeking, so there is no way of determining meaning once and for all. In political life,

> humans make room for an autonomous, purely human meaningfulness, one of mutual respect in activity significant for all its participants and which is not restricted to the preservation of physical life but which, rather, is a source of life that transcends itself in the memory of [the] deed guaranteed precisely by the *polis*.[18]

Again, Patočka makes the distinction between the 'preservation of physical life' and a life which has concern for meaning at its heart and so is an open life of seeking, necessarily transcending itself. 'Purely human meaningfulness' does not signal a meaning that stands apart from the meaning of being as such, since, on the contrary, it is the essence of the human to be concerned with being. So in Patočka's account, political life is not merely a matter of agreeing upon the illusions that will allow us to go on, but is a way of relating to being, and human being, as it is.

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[13] Ibid., 38.
[14] Ibid., 98.
[15] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 63.
[16] Ibid., 70–1.
[17] Ibid., 77.
[18] Ibid., 63.

The *polis* as a space embodies both this open life and the mutual respect for each other's freedom.

> This new human possibility is based on the mutual recognition of humans as free and equal, a recognition which must be continuously acted out, in which activity does not have the character of enforced toil, like labour, but rather of the manifestation of excellence . . . '[19]

Political life is therefore an ongoing act of mutual recognition – and facilitation – of one another's freedom.[20] Patočka conceived of this as an authentic or unalienated activity, unlike labour (in Arendt's schema), because it is grounded in the nature of human being (as open and responsible) and, further, in an essential freedom. Thus to recognize one another as free and equal is not only a matter of legal rights but a matter of acknowledging each other's capacity to live truthfully, in relation to what there is. There is a metaphysical dimension to political life. Reinforcing the notion that possibilities for self and community come from the human openness to being, Patočka argues that: 'Freedom is not an aspect of human nature but means that *Being itself is finite* (my emphasis), that it lives in the shaking of all the naïve "certainties" that would find a home among what-is'.[21] 'Finite' here does not mean that being has a definite end – temporal or spatial – but rather that it refuses to resolve itself into a definite, final shape. The phenomenologist Edith Stein observes, in a different context, that 'whatever is finite needs time to become what it is'.[22] In Patočka, being does not only unfold or become realized in time, in the happening of history,[23] but specifically in the shaking of certainty – the undoing of assumptions about the nature of what is and what is possible. A community is formed within this activity of shakenness or un-settlement: Patočka's 'solidarity of the shaken'. In this account, the foundation of political life and solidarity is not identity, of whatever kind, nor the securing of rights, nor rational self-interest, but a shared experience of upheaval and uncertainty, and a commitment '*in the sphere of freedom for broader access to freedom*'.[24] Against the grain of the quotidian, norm-based thinking that uncertainty is something to be avoided, Patočka attempts to use the moment of uncertainty and its attendant anxieties as a force for solidarity and as a model for how to live in openness. It is all too easy to declare, from a place of relative security and comfort, the value of uncertainty. But this insight can also issue from direct and protracted experiences of upheaval, in Patočka's case life in fascist and communist Czechoslovakia.

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[19] Ibid., 37–8.

[20] For a discussion of Patočka's phenomenology of open movement in relation to human rights, see James Mensch, *Patočka's Asubjective Phenomenology: Toward a New Concept of Human Rights. Orbis Phaenomenologicus Studien*, vol. 38 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016).

[21] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 49.

[22] Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being* (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 2002), 61.

[23] Jean-Luc Nancy's own analysis of the finitude of being in *Finite History* is very close to Patočka's own. ' . . . "we" *are* historical because we belong, in our essence, to this happening that is *the finitude of Being itself*. The fact that Being itself is finite means that it is neither substance nor subject, but its being (or its *sense*) consists only in being *offered in* existence and *to* existence'. Nancy, 'Finite History' in *The Birth to Presence*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 158.

[24] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 149. The context of this remark is a discussion of dialectical materialism in which Patočka argues against a purely economic conception of history, instead seeing economics as linked to politics in the profound sense. The description applies to class struggle, reimagined in Patočka's own framework.

'Technoscience' as Modern Metaphysics

I opened this discussion with the (rather obvious) claim that the possibility for genuine political life within a society cannot be deduced from its style of governance alone. Though democracy offers a better structure for the recognition of the freedom of all participants, both democratic and totalitarian governments, in Patočka's analysis, fail to recognize all that is 'neither objective nor a role'. The claim here is not a general one about the human condition and its tendency to reify that which is properly understood as an ongoing activity. Rather, for Patočka, modernity in particular obscures the possibility of political life as a life lived in freedom, a manifestation of human openness to being and of the openness of being itself. A significant amount of Patočka's writing is devoted to diagnosing this modern condition. His analysis was inspired by the philosopher Edmund Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936), in particular his discussion of the 'mathematisation' of being from Galileo onwards, which describes a process of abstraction away from the world of our experience, as well as Heidegger's critiques in 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1954). Patočka thus describes a 'technoscientific' framework of modernity, combining features of both philosophers in his warnings that applied not only to communist Czechoslovakia but also to liberal democracies.

In his 1967 text 'The Natural World and Phenomenology', Patočka summarizes Heidegger's account of this modern 'technoscientific' metaphysics:

> The central philosophical formulation of this practice of metaphysics is the *principium rationis*, or principle of sufficient reason [. . .] the principle that there must be a reason for everything. Heidegger interprets this principle as one of universal calculability and predictability. Nothing is, nothing exists, unless it conforms to this principle, i.e., unless it meets and is subsumed within the universal requirement that it be secured by calculation. This principle thus amounts to the rigorous, exact objectification of all that is. This objectification transforms all that exists, the *universum*, into an object placed before the subject; the subject, seeking to secure its place in the world, places the object before itself in order to master it. The world becomes a re-presentation in this sense. Thus the entire modern era is the age of the 'world picture', if *picture* is understood in the sense of an 'objectification', a 'representation for the subject', a 'counterpart to the explicit reasoning and deliberating activity of the subject', a 'structure of re-presenting, of form-ing, of constructing'.[25]

For both Heidegger and Patočka, the 'rigorous, exact objectification of all that is' is a transformation of being as it is encountered in existence, in its ambiguity, its modes of presence and absence, its intimate connection to our embodied lives, its meaningfulness. It becomes instead a fully present and uncovered object, meaningless in itself, but valuable instrumentally as a resource. This understanding of what is has its origins in the mathematical sciences, as Husserl points out in his *Crisis* text. It unlocks many possibilities of being without which modern life would cease to function. The problem lies in treating this constructed object as *being itself*, ignoring all of being's possibility; for Patočka, this is a metaphysical error with grave consequences for both human beings and the natural world. A phenomenological approach necessarily undermines the legitimacy of an objective 'world picture' by pointing out that it relies on a prior openness to the world that is left unexplained within the framework itself – an openness that phenomenology takes as its starting point. The assumption within the modern metaphysical framework is that what there is, is in principle available to calculation, mastery, and deployment – a narrow and instrumental understanding of Leibniz's 'reason'. As Patočka explains in *Heretical Essays*, whatever we discover is immediately placed within an 'understanding of being as in principle already fully uncovered and cleared'.[26] This denuded being, akin to mere biological life that Patočka contrasts with the political life, is a denial of being's finitude. In other words, it removes from being its character of problematicity and radical possibility, instead defining the limits according to calculation and probability.

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[25] Chvatík and Plunkett (eds), *Jan Patočka, Selected Writings*, 109.

Thus, building on Patočka's analysis, within the limited but all-encompassing framework of modernity, political life and political action are either recast as series of subjective choices or exercises of power that bear no essential relationship to what 'objectively' is. Nevertheless, government policies are continually justified by an aura of objectivity, embodied by, for example, a claim to be 'following the science' that governments around the world used to justify their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Patočka's longstanding concern was that such government decision making overlooks that which is 'neither objective nor a role'.[27]

Bare Life, Biopolitics, and Death

Patočka refers at many points in his work to mere or bare life[28] as the basis of a framework that is concerned with optimizing and controlling physical life, but which is in fact hostile to flourishing in a broader sense. The idea is that merely being alive is not an end in itself, and 'bondage' to life mistakes what human being is.[29] In *Heretical Essays*, mere life is described as a conception of life that has death as its absolute other: life is the opposite of death. Mere life is organized around the avoidance of death, even though, paradoxically, everyday life can still be mobilized in the service of death.[30] In particular, Patočka regarded the 'twentieth century as war' as still being a movement in the service of the forces of life and peace. The perverse logic of this rationale is one that Patočka seeks to draw out in order to show the danger of a system ruled by bare life, a system which appears on the surface to speak for the things we most value. The 'deployment' of 'forces' in the twentieth century (and the twenty-first) is justified by the value of bare life, notably life and peace as absolute goods for the sake of which individual lives, or the conditions for a meaningful life, can be sacrificed.

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[26] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 114.

[27] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 63.

[28] Patočka uses a range of expressions to convey this notion, rather than any technical term, using phrases such as 'pouhý život daný' [mere given life], 'pouhý život' [mere life]; as well as 'život akceptovaný' [accepted life]; and claims that in politics, 'život není pouze pro život' [life is not just for life].

[29] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 63.

[30] See especially the sixth essay: 'Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War' in Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 119–137. See also James Dodd, 'The Twentieth Century as War' in Ivan Chvatík & Erika Abrams (eds), *Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 203–214.

This analysis comes very close to that of Foucault, himself a reader of Patočka,[31] who saw modern power as distinct from the traditional understanding of sovereignty as the right 'to take life or let live'. This right:

> came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it … It is the power to 'make' live and 'let' die [faire vivre et laisser mourir]. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live [faire mourir ou laisser vivre]. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die.[32]

This new kind of power to 'make live' or 'let die' is *biopower*, and it underpins the new *biopolitics* that became sharply and disconcertingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Foucault and Patočka are both concerned with the question of how systems that operate in the name of preserving or improving life end up inflicting great violence: whether in the optimization of life through the elimination of 'weak' or undesirable populations, as seen in the eugenicist policies that were widespread in the early twentieth century (most obviously in Nazi Germany), or in more subtle manifestations of epistemic and moral violence that eliminate the possibility of meaningful action.

In Foucault, the life that is at stake in what he calls biopolitics is the life of the population that can be studied and managed by means of statistics, medicine, biology, and other sciences; the self, the object of Foucault's 'care for the self' or Patočka's 'care for the soul', does not figure as such into the conception of life with which biopolitics is concerned. Instead, the individual is a member of the biopolitical body and an agent of biopower, managing itself and subjecting itself freely to biopolitical norms. While Patočka does not speak about bare life in precisely the same terms, his idea of a radical supercivilization, defined by the norms of efficiency and optimization, is similar to Foucault's account. Likewise, the notion of the world as a standing reserve of forces, which Patočka imports from Heidegger, complements such a perspective. Life as a 'resource' to be uncovered and deployed has no place for the human being as an individual self and leads quite rationally to an ethics of population-wide efficiency and optimization.

I mentioned that for Patočka a 'biologistic' or biopolitical system sees life as the opposite of death. This may seem like trivial point, one that is obviously true. Yet in his account this as an ideological – and false – conception. Bare life as an existence lived in fear of death, lived purely in order not to die, is an existence 'in the shackles of life, that is, in the shackles of death overcome and postponed, but '*turned away from* this ever-present, ever-possible end'.[33] Such a life has no real sense of itself, no understanding of what it is to be alive or what living might be *for*. It is thus deprived of meaningful political engagement, which according to Patočka requires an openness to what is, including a reckoning with what is not (the nothing) and what is not yet (the possible). He insists that those chained to bare life are 'in servitude to the powerful, those who organise life and determine the satisfying of needs'.[34] The fear of death that forms the other side of the value of life reinforces and perpetuates existing power structures and the status quo.

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[31] See Simona Forti, *New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) and Ibid., 'The Soul as Site of Dissidence' in *Thinking After Europe: Jan Patočka and Politics*, eds. Francesco Tava & Darian Meacham (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 57–74.

[32] Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (eds), Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–76* (New York: Picador, 2003), 241.

[33] Chvatík and Plunkett (eds), *Jan Patočka, Selected Writings*, eds., 127.

[34] Ibid.

Just as being is finite and therefore problematic, so for Patočka life is defined in relationship with non-being, with death. The first sense in which to understand this is that death has the power of individuation, of shaping a person into a self. My existence involves a relationship to my own death that is not captured by the objective fact that 'people die'. Patočka makes this point in his speech commemorating the painter and poet Josef Čapek on the anniversary of his death in a Nazi concentration camp. In Čapek's work *The Limping Pilgrim* (1936), human beings are bounded by non-being which defines them: 'I was not, I *am*, I will not be'.[35] In Čapek's understanding, 'death individualizes'.[36] Patočka elaborates on Čapek's claim.

> Thus death becomes a dividing line between what is genuine and what ultimately matters [. . .] Death is neither confirmation of a universal *nihil*, nor, on the other hand, proof that human beings are, at their spiritual core, masters and sensemakers of all reality: death is an opportunity to confront what remains safely hidden from us in life, because we face, or so we think, more urgent matters, though in fact they are distractions; death serves to concentrate; only under the strict gaze of death are we made whole — we are not only who we are engaged in this or that activity, whether important or not, but ephemeral humans living in the face of the universe, in relation to its eternity, and therefore *sub specie aeterni* alone.[37]

Life then is understood as a being oriented towards death; confrontation with death is what makes a human life into a whole rather than a diffuse series of actions, a collection of roles, or a generic resource to be deployed. Paradoxically death not only individualizes, in the sense of making my life a meaningful whole, but it also shows the place of individual life 'in the face of the universe'. For Patočka, this recognition of one's own ephemerality before the eternal universe does not render life meaningless: death is not the 'confirmation of a universal *nihil*'. On the contrary, it serves to 'concentrate' and make more urgent one's search for meaning. Patočka's phenomenology of open being, elaborated in the previous section, adds weight to these insights by tying the finitude of human life to the finitude of being itself.

Life as being towards death, rather than the opposite of death, makes sense of another, related, idea in Patočka's writings, that a life in truth, the life of the one who cares for the soul and so for the *polis*,[38] must reckon both with ordinary desires for a secure, materially sufficient life and with a recognition that human existence is called beyond the satisfaction of such desires. In the Sixth Heretical Essay, Patočka argues that an effective struggle for individual and collective freedom lies in:

> the *solidarity of the shaken* – the solidarity of those who are capable of understanding what life and death are all about, and so what history is about. That history is the conflict of *mere life*, barren and chained by fear, and *life at the peak*, life that does not plan [account] for the ordinary days of a future but sees clearly that the everyday, its life and its 'peace', have an end.[39]

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[35] Ibid., 58.

[36] Ibid., 59. In this same section, Patočka contrasts Čapek's understanding of death to that of Hegel. In Patočka's telling, Hegel sees the essence of human being as 'the infinity of their spiritual essence', and therefore death opposes individuality by showing it to be a merely apparent and non-essential state of being, one that dying transcends.

[37] Ibid., 60.

[38] See Chvatík and Plunkett (eds), 'On the Soul in Plato' in *Jan Patočka, Selected Writings*, 75–92.

[39] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 134.

Those who understand 'what life and death are all about' are those who recognize the limits of a biologistic or biopolitical thinking which holds mere life as the ultimate value. Patočka's account here is echoed in his account of being as *polemos*, a conflict between the forces of day and the forces of night.[40] Thus a genuine political life is impossible in a system that values only naked life and tries to push death out of the frame, for instance, by a medical paradigm within which death is what *happens* after all treatments have been exhausted.[41] 'Mere life, barren and chained by fear' of uncertainty and death describes our quotidian existence, in which we seek safety and continuity. Few people actively wish to die, and most would prefer not to think about death at all. Yet there are moments in life when death is not the thing one fears most, when one is willing to confront death.[42] For Patočka, moments of this kind are experiences of 'life at the peak', akin to Karl Jaspers' 'limit situations', which call for a radical choice that cannot be objectively decided from the 'data' of the situation itself or the operative existing 'values' from which one might choose. Patočka famously uses the front-line experience of soldiers in the First World War as an example of those who see through the logic of life. Socrates' choice to die, while less dramatic than the front, is another of Patočka's examples, perhaps a better one,[43] that demonstrates how a human life shaped by an understanding of the stakes of life and death might play out. In the case of Socrates, the choice to die is a form of care for the soul or the self, *against* the value of life.

In 'The Natural World and Phenomenology', Patočka offers a description of what a confrontation with death brings about that is missing in a biologistic or, in Foucault's terms, a biopolitical framework.

> Yet in this confrontation, a disconnect occurs between the person and the role. An urgent question is posed here, a question that cannot be answered by the social consequences of the threat represented by the organization of power, the structuring of humanity as a constellation of forces. The view of the whole still remains, answering the question that deflated the role and brought about freedom, but failed to fill that freedom with substance and give it definition.[44]

This is another way of understanding Patočka's claim that death individuates. The person becomes separated from their generic role as a resource, an instantiation of the state, or as an agent of biopower and instead becomes capable of withdrawing from this complex of forces by saying no to them.[45] Specifically, in reckoning with non-being, the person becomes a self or a soul, a movement unaccounted for and uncountable within the economy of mere life. The 'urgent question' Patočka mentions in the above passage is the question of what life is for, which cannot arise from within the biopolitical itself, and which in fact is actively prevented within such a framework, since it threatens the prevailing order.

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[40] See Gregory Freid, *Heidegger's Polemos*: *From Being to Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

[41] David Cayley, 'Questions about the current pandemic from the point of view of Ivan Illich', 8 April, 2020 and 'Concerning Life', 11 June, 2021, https://www.davidcayley.com/blog;

[42] See Patočka's 1973 Varna Lecture 'The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl, and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger' in *Jan Patočka Selected Writings*, eds. Chvatík and Plunkett, 281–294. See also James Dodd, 'Patočka and the metaphysics of sacrifice' and Michaela Belejkanicova, 'Solidarity of the shaken: from the experience (*Erlebnis*) to history', *Studies in East European Thought*, 73 (2021): 271–286; 287–307.

[43] Patočka notes that after their experiences on the front line, many soldiers returned to the ordinary life and the status quo, rather than forging new forms of life in solidarity with others who had been 'shaken'. Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 131ff.

[44] Chvatík and Plunkett (eds), *Jan Patočka, Selected Writings*, 176.

[45] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 135.

Bare Life and COVID-19

We have seen that Patočka and Foucault's conceptions of political life and biopolitics offer some ways of understanding modern political power and the status quo, as well as raising questions about the stakes of life and death. The COVID-19 pandemic was a testing ground for such ideas, and scholars at the time had already begun to discuss COVID policy through this lens.[46] The most prominent among these was the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2020), whose conception of 'bare' or 'naked' life [vita nuda] has affinities with Patočka and Foucault, as well as Arendt. Agamben's bare life, like Patočka's distinction between mere life and political life, concerns a conception of life as biological existence rather than as the site of meaning and possibility. Agamben published a series of now infamous essays during 2020–21, bringing the notions of bare life and biopolitics to bear on policy decisions within the current pandemic and making a case against lockdown, masks, and social distancing on these grounds. Long a scourge of the right for his critiques of the 'state of emergency' as a means of justifying government power (e.g. in America's 'war on terror'), Agamben's COVID essays drew widespread criticism from the intellectual left. While some of these critiques are merited, the project of thinking critically about biopolitics, including Agamben's thinking, does not fall neatly along political lines. Indeed, the critical reaction to Agamben's reflections is an indicator of the pervasiveness of the 'biopolitics' that transcends the ideological markers that we habitually use to distinguish ourselves from others. The framework of bare life provokes consideration, often unsettling, of the values that underlie policy decisions and individual actions, beyond simplistic slogans about 'individual liberties' on the one hand or 'following the science' on the other.

Many of the popular and academic discussions around COVID policy have centred on the question of individual liberty versus the obligation of the government to protect public health. Indeed, given the immense power that modern governments are able to wield, both directly and indirectly, through data collection, surveillance and other technologies, such questions could scarcely be avoided. As much as crisis situations demand immediate action, they also occasion reflection on wider questions of this kind about what society values – even if such questions are at the same time discouraged.[47] In the UK and the US, worries about the government violating individual freedoms were especially pronounced, particularly in the US where any perceived encroachment on freedom is perennially able to stoke paranoia, anger, and fear. The more convincing among such arguments were those that did not speak about freedom and 'rights' in general but about specific activities and ways of life that were threatened by lockdown and other pandemic control measures – in other words, those analyses that questioned what kind of life is desirable and why. Not being 'free' to eat at a restaurant or go maskless in a supermarket do not, to my mind, qualify as fundamental deprivations of human freedom, but other restrictions, such as the right to meet with loved ones or to mourn the dying, are surely critical freedoms.

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[46] See the special issue of *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 77, no. 2–3 (2021): Thinking the Pandemic: Philosophical Perspectives; especially the Introduction by Róbson Ramos Dos Reis et al. (477–486) and Sarah Horton, 'When the Face Becomes a Carrier: Biopower, Levinas's Ethics, and Contagion' (715–732). See also Abdul Wahab Suri, 'The Rejuvenation of the Withering Nation State and Bio-power: The New Dynamics of Human Interaction' *Bioethical Inquiry*, 17 (2020): 535–538; See also D.L. Couch, Priscilla Robinson & Paul A. Komesaroff, 'COVID-19—Extending Surveillance and the Panopticon' *Bioethical Inquiry*, 17 (2020): 809–814.

[47] In a wave of uncertainty and solidarity after the terrorist attack on 9/11, President George W. Bush encouraged the American people to 'go about their business', 'shop' and carry on with ordinary life, at the same time offering them an enemy to keep any sense of threat to the normal order external to that order itself. Presidential News Conference, Oct 11, 2001.
https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4552776/user-clip-bush-shopping-quote

With the aim of preventing or slowing the spread of the virus through the population, governments around the world imposed exceptional limits on social contact, both by isolating people in their homes and by enforcing masks and social distancing in public spaces. Face-to-face human contact was severely limited, and actual physical contact was cast as irresponsible and dangerous – a vector of contagion. Gatherings, including funerals, were prohibited. Many schoolchildren were kept at home. Teaching went online. Where these measures were not enforced by police, military, and other agents of the state, they were effectively enforced through fear and anxiety, even when those were focused into a well-intentioned concern for the welfare of others. 'How do the day, life, and peace, govern all individuals, their bodies and souls?' asks Patočka. 'By means of death; by threatening life' because life is 'the highest value that exists for them'.[48] Sociologist Deborah Lupton, in her Foucauldian analysis of public health, describes the ways in which the 'discourses and practices' of public health and social medicine exercise power by inviting 'individuals voluntarily to conform to their objectives, to discipline themselves, to turn the gaze upon themselves in the interests of their health'.[49] Seen in this light, the worry about government directly curbing liberties misses the more pervasive operations of biopower and the threat these pose to our ability to thoughtfully question the relationship between our actions and our values. The pandemic has made clear that the theoretical construction of life as mere or bare life has direct influences on the behaviour of both individuals and governments.

One symptom of the 'rule of life' that has been exaggerated by the pandemic, though not caused by it, is the transformation of the (for Patočka) political act of care for self into care for health and vigilance against illness and death; 'stay home, save lives' was the endlessly repeated slogan in the UK that effectively convinced people to police their own behaviour. The problem lies in the kind of life that it presupposes, and the other lives – or forms of life – that are damaged by the collective action of isolation. Life, in this framework, is divorced from its context as openness to being and to others and is transformed into a 'role' within a complex of biopolitical forces. Patočka notes that total mobilization of the world as a network of forces was hampered in previous eras by the 'defective organization of one of its participants', a 'defect' that was remedied when human beings in the twentieth century embraced their own role in this mobilization (exemplified in both world wars) as 'bearers of a general movement',[50] as *human resources*.[51] Of course there is little chance of genuine political life in such a framework. The political is not a striving 'of life for the sake of life (whatever life it may be), but only life for freedom and in it, [the active realisation] *that such a life is possible*'.[52] This brings the conversation about individual liberties and freedom far from its libertarian or neoliberal context and into a philosophical context about what life in and for freedom really means.

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[48] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 129.

[49] Deborah Lupton, *The Imperative of Health: Public Health and the Regulated Body* (Sage: London) 1995, 11.

[50] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 120.

[51] Ibid., 128. See also Patočka's discussion of modern totalizing 'supercivilisation' in Jan Patočka 'Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt' [Supercivilization and Its Inner Conflict], in *Sebrané spisy*, Vol. 1: *Péče o duši* (Prague: Oikoymenh, 1996): 243–302.

The constant barrage of statistics about infections and deaths, without an adequate context for understanding what these statistics meant, created a generalized anxiety during the pandemic, making people feel threatened and, as a result, making them behave more compliantly. The predominance of data is the natural outcome of a technoscientific and biopolitical system that has already transformed life into that which can be 'accounted' for and managed. This quality of *precision without meaning* is characteristic of Patočka's understanding of modernity, in which the real is reduced to the objectively calculable and is simultaneously divorced from meaning, which, in turn, is relegated to the subjective. One of the oddities of the pandemic is that the figures were meant to speak for themselves. The rising numbers of reported cases and deaths, continually being updated across all media outlets, represented by the ominous ascending line on countless graphs, gave the impression of an objective knowledge of the global situation. We were being told everything all of the time. The trouble was that the data did not convey anything definite and had to be interpreted for the public by experts who disagreed amongst themselves, and whose disagreements we as the public were not qualified to adjudicate. As a result, the proliferation of data served little more than to create and maintain a heightened atmosphere of fear and confusion; it also offered people something to talk about that *seemed* meaningful: abstract statistical vocabulary such as 'flattening the curve' entered the realm of everyday conversation. It is likely this pastime provided a distraction from the deeper questions that naturally arise in situations of crisis. The pandemic reflects a more general trend in our 'technological civilisation' that Patočka identifies: 'today the danger is that knowing so many particulars we are losing the ability to see the questions and that which is their foundation'.[53]

The relentless deployment of statistics during the pandemic was a symptom of much wider deference to technocratic and scientific expertise that has steadily increased over the last several decades. Governments during COVID declared they were being 'led by the science' in their public health policy decisions. Like the idea that life is the opposite of death or that staying home saves lives, the idea of being led by the science seems a clear and reasonable statement that those responsible for policy making will take into account scientific facts about how a disease spreads, its likely side effects, and how deadly it is. It should also mean that they will take into account other sciences and areas of the humanities that bear on issues of public health – for example social psychology, economics, philosophy, and researchers who study the effect of precarity, poverty, loneliness, etc. However, there are many reasons not to take this claim about following the science at face value. Firstly, it is clear that governments had to make choices about *which* sciences and scientists to follow, which statistics to adopt into their probabilistic models, which modelling assumptions to accept. These choices, and the rationale behind them, are rendered opaque by the claim to follow 'the science', as if science were univocal. As David

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[52] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 142.
[53] Ibid., 118.

Cayley puts it, 'This fiction, in my view, perpetuates a false image of the sciences in which all variability, contingency and bias is suppressed. Worse, its fundamentalism breeds the very anti-science which it intends to oppose. The sciences will thrive and serve their proper purposes only when they are no longer mistaken for the voice of Nature or the voice of God'. [54] When disputes among scientists or among different branches of the sciences arose, it was often a case of the public choosing to trust experts that agreed with what they already thought or who seemed sympathetic to their own political views.

But beyond these significant problems, the claim of policy being led by science is simply incoherent. Science, as it has developed, cannot speak to the purportedly subjective realm of meaning and value, from which it has been formally divorced[55] so that any application of science to questions of how to organize a society or what policies to pursue involves inferences and leaps of logic that are not themselves legitimated by 'the science'. This is a different issue to the critique that the science – really the widely divergent scienc*es*—kept offering different answers in a situation that was constantly evolving, and with insufficient data. This lack of consensus may have been frustrating to many, but within the norms of scientific inquiry, one would expect scientific advice to shift as more factors and data points became known, and one would expect divergence in different branches of the sciences, given their differing methodological assumptions. Of course the problem of *interpreting* data is always a significant one, and this was made clear by disagreements among the particular sciences – for example virology versus epidemiology versus statistics. However, the real problem lay not in the diverse and shifting scientific opinion, which is a sign of a healthy and open scientific discourse, but the very idea of a 'science-led' policy response to a pandemic illness. As many scholars have pointed out, pandemics are not merely medical phenomena but are socially and politically constructed as well.[56] Science during the pandemic has been used as a tool of 'objective' legitimation for the exercise of power, giving the *choices* of governments the appearance of necessity. This removed the space for an open conversation about what human values public policy ought to promote and what to do when the value of a healthy population clashes with other values fundamental to a meaningful existence. Merely having such conversations was often cast as threatening to life: 'What do you want? To let people die?'[57]

The pandemic thus shone a light on existing features of society, yet these features remain largely inscrutable without further inquiry into their ideological and metaphysical ground. The sacrifices that were demanded of us during COVID were offered up, willingly or grudgingly, in the name of greater good, with the notion that we were saving lives. Yet Agamben is correct when he claims that a society that is willing 'to feel plagued, to isolate itself at home and to suspend its normal living conditions' must have already been living with a plague, 'that, evidently, the living conditions of the people had become such that a sudden sign was enough for them to appear for what they were – that is intolerable'.[58] The reduction of life to bare life is not limited to the pandemic; the notion of 'the greater good' and of 'saving life' in our commonplace assumptions has to be questioned. Failure to do so means that certain economic and political realities and structural features of society remain opaque. What Patočka referred to as life 'lived in the fear of death', in order not to die, not only prevents the possibility of genuine political life in openness but also plays into the hands of whomever promises to satisfy the need for security – whether governments imposing isolation and distancing, the pharmaceutical companies manufacturing the vaccines, the technology companies selling home-working software and equipment, the online retailers that deliver goods to homes without contact, the cleaning and sanitizing products that allow for a largely performative 'hygiene theatre', the surveillance technologies meant to ensure 'home security' during periods of unrest, or the gun manufacturers profiting from generalized social anxiety, especially in the USA. Questions about the economics and institutional structures of safety go beyond the political-social organization of any specific country and suggest that a wider biopolitical paradigm is at work within the technoscientific frame of modernity. Patočka was no stranger to life-deadening structures operating in the name of life and the public good. To save lives, and to save the possibility for genuine political life in which the ends of our actions matter, it is important to ask with Patočka, 'What is there, viewed spiritually, that is living on this earth? On what could one still base the faith, or rather, the hope for a life beyond the merely biological level?'[59]

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[54] Cayley, 'Concerning Life'.

[55] Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 70–1.

[56] João Nunes, *Health, Politics and Security*. e-cadernos CES, 15 (2012): 142–164.

[57] See David Cayley's analysis of this question (April 2020; June 2021).

[58] Giorgio Agamben, 'Riflessioni sulla peste', *Quodlibet*. 27 March, 2020. https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-riflessioni-sulla-peste; Ibid.,'*A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica*' Milano: Quodlibet, 2020.

Disclosure Statement

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[59] Chvatík and Plunkett (eds), *Jan Patočka, Selected Writings*, 439.