

Devotion and Attestation. Rational and ethical life in Patočka and Ricoeur

Eddo Evink
Open University, Heerlen, The Netherlands
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

This article presents a comparison between Ricoeur's and Patočka's ideas on the subject as a rational and ethical person. Despite differences in style and interests, their work manifests important resemblances and agreements. The comparison focuses on the primordial embedding of the individual subject in natural and social structures, on the ethical implications of this situation of the subject, and on the differences in both philosophers' evaluation of modern culture.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Rationality, Self-Care, Phenomenological Ethics, Embodiment

In early modern philosophy the rational subject was a very successful figure. Rationality was man's essence and pride. With precise objective argumentation and calculation all scientific problems could in principle be solved and man should be able to understand, dominate and perhaps even control the world he lived in. In addition, because of his (usually not her) rational capabilities, man was capable of coping with his emotions and making deliberate ethical decisions. In the age of Enlightenment, he could even play a main role in the historical development of victorious progress. But since Romanticism, from the nineteenth century on, his self-understanding radically changed. Schopenhauer, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud undermined his position as rational master of the world and changed him in an irrational puppet that is guided by natural, social, cultural and psychical forces beyond his control.

In the twentieth century this fate is widely discussed in many currents of thought.

Paul Ricoeur has played a prominent role in these discussions. He takes the critical approaches of the “masters of suspicion” seriously, but at the same time he looks for what can be saved from the modern human subject as a rational and ethical person. This project, the “hermeneutics of the subject” can even be seen as the core of his philosophical projects.

In his writings on the thought of his colleague Jan Patočka, Ricoeur claims that Patočka takes the same position. The first of these texts was written for *Le Monde*, on March 19, 1977, as an *in memoriam* after Patočka’s tragic death, caused by severe interrogations by the Czechoslovak secret police. Ricoeur situates Patočka’s dissidence in the line of the philosophical attestations of his teacher Edmund Husserl, who argued for a “...recovery [*réveil*] of the subject”, and against the resignations of reason by scientism, Romanticism and nihilism (Ricoeur 1991a, 69-70). Through Husserl, the intellectual resistance in Prague against the communist regime finds its roots, according to Ricoeur, in eighteenth century European rationalism:

Without any doubt I can discern in this appeal of Husserl one of the links by which the current claim for liberties and human rights in Prague is connected to the great European rationalism of the classic age, through the 19th century socialisms. (Ricoeur 1991a, 70)¹

Ricoeur places this moral appeal for freedom and human rights in opposition to various forms of critique of reason that were widespread in Western Europe in the 1970s:

For western intellectuals, who are very busy with getting loose of moralism and deconstructing rationalism, it is difficult to understand this recourse of Czech intellectuals to morality in the very field of political requests. (ibid.)²

By referring to an open letter by Václav Havel, Ricoeur shows how the communist tyranny leads to “an incredible spiritual corruption”, to which a rational ethical attitude and an appeal to human rights are the only right answer. He ends his short article in honour of Patočka with the statement that “[...] in the case of extreme humiliation of a people, the philosophical

plea for subjectivity becomes the only recourse of the civilian against the tyrant.” (ibid., 73)³

Without any doubt we can praise Ricoeur for the way he honoured Patočka and for asking attention and support for Charta 77. But one might ask if Ricoeur was right in his sketch of Patočka’s philosophy as a rationalist defender of subjectivity. As Ricoeur knew very well (Ricoeur 2007), in critical studies of Husserl’s Cartesianism, Patočka had elaborated on an a-subjective phenomenology (Patočka 1989a; 1989b; 1990a; 1990b; 2000; 2015; Karfík 2008; Mensch 2016; Učnik 2015); and in his *Heretical Essays* as well as in other publications he had given a very critical analysis of modern Western thought and culture (Patočka 1996). Can he also be seen as a defender of the modern rational and ethical subject?

In this article I shall make a comparison between Ricoeur’s and Patočka’s ideas on the subject as a rational and ethical person. This comparison will manifest important resemblances and agreements in their points of view, in spite of differences in style and interests. The comparison will focus on the primordial embedding of the individual subject in natural and social structures (a) and on the ethical implications of this situation of the subject (b). Further it will be shown that the main difference between their philosophies can be found in their evaluation of modern culture (c).

1. Patočka

Ricoeur and Patočka both belong, together with philosophers like Sartre, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, to the second generation of phenomenologists, who thoroughly studied Husserl, but were also deeply influenced by Heidegger. With Heidegger, all five made the move from a Husserlian phenomenology that mainly focused on epistemological matters to an existential phenomenology that saw human life as its central topic of research. But they also moved, each in their own way, beyond Heidegger, by emphasizing the bodily, social and cultural embedding of the subject, that was admittedly mentioned, but also neglected by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. They all regard the human person as originally embodied, social and practical; these features of intersubjectivity,

worldliness and praxis are all constitutive for the subject's way of being. An important difference between these phenomenologists lies in the way this being embedded of the subject is actually thought. Sartre and Levinas, on the one hand, discuss the singularity of the human person in such a way that their view of the subject starts with a sharp separation between subjects. Merleau-Ponty, Patočka and Ricoeur, on the other hand, underline intersubjectivity as primary to any subjectivity and as an insurmountable pre-reflective layer of existence. Furthermore, Patočka and Ricoeur stress, more than Merleau-Ponty, the responsibility of a subject for the other. A good understanding of human existence necessarily includes this notion of responsibility, in order to recognize human life as the life of an ethical subject (Jervolino 2007). Let us take a closer look at this specific existential phenomenology, starting with the reflections of Jan Patočka.

a) asubjective phenomenology

More than his contemporary phenomenologists, Patočka stays close to the Husserlian phenomenological method of *epochè* and reduction. However, in Husserl's phenomenology Patočka recognizes a problematic Cartesian tension, i.e. the effort to find absolute certainty in reflection, in the *cogito*. According to Patočka, the transcendental reduction does not lead to subjective or intersubjective consciousness as the "field of appearing", but to a field that cannot be equated with a specific being that appears, to a field of appearing that is presupposed by all beings. In several texts, Patočka calls this field "world", which means that all phenomena can only appear within a larger context, within a horizon (Patočka 1991, 2000). Worldliness is the main characteristic of every appearance. The world is not reducible to consciousness, as Husserl tried to show with his famous thought experiment (Husserl 1982, 109-112). To the contrary, consciousness can only understand itself as always already constituted in relation to the world, within the field of appearing. The world as the original horizon within which phenomena appear, organizes the subject as a centre around which they appear:

But then, through the universality of the *epochè*, it also becomes clear that, precisely in the same way that the self is the condition of the possibility of the appearing of what is worldly, the world – as the original horizon [*Urhorizont*] (and not as the sum of realities [*Realitätenall*]) – presents the condition of the possibility of the appearing of the self. [...] [The] I is only experienced as the organizational centre of a universal structure of appearance that cannot be reduced to a being as such, appearing in its particularity [*Einzelsein*]. (Patočka 2015a, 49)

Through this elaboration of the transcendental *epochè* and reduction, Patočka develops an “asubjective phenomenology”, which he later labels as “phenomenology of the appearing as such”. “Asubjective” does not mean that the subject does not play any role in the manifestation of phenomena, but it does mean that the subject cannot find an unprejudiced transcendental position to describe the appearance of phenomena, for it is itself shaped by the field of appearing.

Consequently, the subject can never entirely grasp itself. In his lecture course from 1969, Patočka describes the subject as a “primordial dynamism”, as a dynamic stream of centrifugal energy, always directed outward, towards the world (Patočka 1998, 29-53). When the subject reflects on itself, it does not find this original dynamic I, but a “me”, that appears for the pre-reflective I. In other words, the I is itself a horizon, that can never be surveyed: “The horizon is the appearance of what does not appear, appearing only in a certain sense and belonging to an appearance.” (Patočka 1998, 39)

The main goal and orientation of this pre-reflective dynamism of the I is another I, is ‘Thou’. Only in relation to other subjects the I can realize its first reflection. As in a mirror, “...I see myself in the eyes of the other. The other need not be concretely instantiated. It is a constant structure of our experience; I see myself ever as the other, as the other sees me.” (Patočka 1998, 51) The subject, therefore, is originally embedded in worldly and intersubjective structures, that are primordial to any reflection (Mensch 2016, 3-63). These structures are not fixed; they are, just like the I itself, always in movement. In these phenomenological analyses of the dynamic

human existence, the subject is clearly de-centred, it is always being constituted by the world that it participates in.

b) Movement and dedication

Patočka's reflections on movement belong to his most important contributions to phenomenology. He has written a profound study on the history of the concept of movement, with Aristotle as its main protagonist (Patočka 2011). According to Patočka, the Aristotelian notion of movement as purposeful actualisation of potentialities, needs to be taken up again in phenomenology. In modern philosophy the concept of movement was narrowed to a quantifiable pattern in an abstract space. Bergson has tried to develop a more insightful understanding of movement, as a synthetic unity of lived experience. Patočka tries to deepen this approach by combining Heidegger's analyses of *Dasein* with the Aristotelian idea of movement as realisation of potentiality (Patočka 1998, 143-145). This also implies that Aristoteles' view of movement, being related to a static kernel, needs to be radicalized:

To understand the movement of human existence, for that we need to radicalize Aristotle's conception of movement. The possibilities that ground movement have no pre-existing bearer, no necessary referent statically at their foundation, but rather all synthesis, all inner interconnection of movement takes place within it alone. All inner unification is accomplished by the movement itself. (Patočka 1998, 146-147)

Human existence is first of all a bodily existence. The body is a complex of movements that are interrelated and find their unity in themselves. These movements do not have a body as their substrate, they constitute the body in a constant flux of movements. In addition, the body-subject is not something in itself, it is always in dynamic relation with its environment, with the world. The world to which the subject relates, opens itself up in a spatial movement to the subject. The things in the world move towards the subject as a call, as an appeal of possibilities to be realised. "Our own dynamics, the verve that brings us to things, finds a counterpart in the orientation of the world towards us, in the original dynamic traits of space." (Patočka 1995, 68)⁴ The movements in our body, the movements

in connections with other people, the dynamic relations with the world make us who we are:

Before we could be able to do whatever, the world has already obtained us, the world holds us, in and by our disposition. Such is the contribution of that domain to the original movement that we are – movement towards the world, from and through the world, back to ourselves. The disposition, ‘where one in is’, always already tells us in the most general way that we are in the world and *where* we are in it. (Patočka 1995, 69)⁵

This circular movement between subject and world within the always comprising horizon of the world is constitutive for our human existence. We become ourselves by finding our place in the world. Patočka develops a deeper understanding of this dynamic intersubjective and social constitution of our existence by emphasizing the ethical side of it. Since human existence is always in movement and never fixed, it is a task and a responsibility. We have to take our life upon us, to realize it and to give an account of it. We can only find and understand ourselves, if we take the circular relation with the world, by which we exist as human beings, as a point of departure for our self-understanding. In other words, the relation between man and world is understood as a relation of surrender. In general terms, Patočka describes this surrender as a circular relation with the world that enriches our self: “The return to the self is not analogous to a reflection in a mirror; rather, it is a process in which we seek and constitute ourselves, lose ourselves, and find ourselves again.” (Patočka 1998, 57)⁶

Patočka has further analysed this complex of circular relations between man and world in his idea of the three movements of human life. “Each of these three movements,” Patočka states, “is always a movement shared.” (Patočka 1998, 149) The basic movements of human existence thus are all movements in which we are connected with the world and with other subjects. In several texts he has discussed this threefold movement in different contexts and with a different terminology.

The first movement is described by Patočka as “the movement of sinking roots, of anchoring – an instinctive-affective movement of our existence.” (Patočka 1998, 149) This concerns first of all our embodied existence: “...the original control over our own organism which is presupposed in all our

further, freer modes of comportment, of relating to humans and things.” (Patočka 1998, 148) It also consists in the way we always share our life with others. This is manifest “...in our dependence on an other who provides us with safety, with warmth, it is manifest in attachment, protection, sympathy.” (Patočka 1998, 149) All our relations to the world thus start from out of a natural and cultural belonging, which is obvious in the first years of our life, but which also remains a basic need during our entire life. Patočka calls this the mutual love and acceptance between parents and children, but also speaks about it as a mutual compensation for every individual existence. “This compensation takes place in all to whom this existence is devoted, whom it loves and whom it itself accepts in turn.” (Patočka 1996, 30; 1998, 149) Devotion and love are thus primordial aspects of human life. In short, “humans are beings for others.” (Patočka 1998, 177) This movement finds its boundaries in the earth as the unmoving ground on which it takes place, as well as in what is strange, unfamiliar and dangerous, the opposite of the safe and sound.

The second movement is defined as “the movement of self-sustenance, of self-projection – the movement of our coming to terms with the reality we handle, a movement carried out in the region of work.” (Patočka 1998, 148) This is the realm of active relation to our environment, of the everyday use of things, which Heidegger called *Zeug*. Patočka calls it “the sphere in which we usually live, [...] the sphere of meaning.” (Patočka 1998, 150) The intersubjective relations of work and cooperation find their reverse in concurrence, conflict and suffering. We can express ourselves in our work, but labour is also a burden. Nevertheless, Patočka describes this second movement also as a movement of self-denial, be it a self-denial in service of a self-interest through rational behaviour:

The ideal of the second vital line is the ascetic ideal. Self-extension takes place in the context of self-denial, overcoming instinctual, immediate desire. Though ultimately it follows an instinctual goal, the means is self-control. (Patočka 1998, 159)

The third movement is the one that makes our existence really human and authentic. Patočka describes it as “the movement of existence in the narrower sense of the word which

typically seeks to bestow a global closure and meaning on the regions and rhythms of the first and second movement.” (Patočka 1998, 148) This means that humans are able to transcend the relations to things and to other humans in the world and to relate to the world as a whole, as well as to their own existence.

There are several sides to this movement. It is a movement of truth in the sense that we can take a distance from the usual and traditional views on things and ask how they really are. By rational reflection, humans can put the knowledge and ideas of their seemingly self-evident perspectives between brackets and take a critical stand that asks for precise perception and argumentation.

Nothing of the earlier life of acceptance remains in place, all the pillars of the community, traditions, and myths, are equally shaken, as are all the answers that only preceded questions; the modest yet secure and soothing meaning, though not lost, is transformed. It becomes as enigmatic as all else. (Patočka 1996, 39-40)

Questioning our traditional worldviews is part of this attitude; it asks for a rational understanding of the world. In this movement of transcendence, humans can find a meta-perspective on the standards, procedures and perspectives by which they are connected with the world and with others. Such a meta-perspective, however, does not give survey over the whole world or one’s existence as a whole. It remains a perspective that is grounded in the first two movements of anchoring and self-projection.

The finitude of this perspective implies an ethical side of the same movement. Since we cannot find definite answers to our questions about the essence of the world and of ourselves, we have to give an account of our views and judgments. The rationality of the third movement, its effort to find truth by reflection and argumentation, is thus directly connected with the ethical obligation to testify for our opinions. In other words, the third movement is the movement of responsibility. Only through this movement, the subject can understand itself as taking the position of openness towards the world and other beings: “...the world opens itself to it for the first time.” (Patočka 1996, 39) Humans are now able to understand

themselves in relation to the field of appearing, to being, they “...are *called* to things, to give them what they lack, to make that encounter possible. [...] ...human life is a service.” (Patočka 1998, 170)

Moreover, only in this third movement the human being can understand itself as an ethical subject. Patočka calls it a movement of breakthrough, because it breaks through the boundaries of the first and the second movement, that were still tied to traditional patterns of thought and behaviour. The third movement reaches beyond our desire for safety and self-development, beyond any self-interest. It is the highest movement of surrender, in which the individual human being gives up itself, loses itself and finds itself in a life of devotion to what is of higher importance than its own life. Patočka does not have in mind here a devotion to a higher entity, but a devotion toward the openness of being itself. The third movement is a movement of transcendence: “Not intentionality but transcendence is the original trait of life, [...] the transcendence of humans towards the world, to the whole of what is brought to light.” (Patočka 1996, 48) This relation to the appearing as such, to the world as a whole, is not only and not primarily a matter of knowledge and thought, it is an ethical relation of praxis and freedom: “The transcendence to the world [...] is originally not given by the activity of thought and reason; [...] its foundation, rather, is freedom.” (Patočka 1996, 49) This ethical relation of surrender and devotion to being and to beings can also be described as a relation of love. (Patočka 2015b)

In short, human life, in Patočka’s view, is an ethical life of self-surrender, in response to the call of other beings, an openness and devotion to other beings, beyond all self-interest (Mensch 2016, 92ff):

My being is no longer defined as a being for me but rather as a being in self-surrender, a being which opens itself to being, which lives in order for things—as well as myself and others—to be, to show themselves as what they are. This means: life in self-surrender, life outside oneself, not a mere solidarity of interests but a total reversal of interest—I no longer live in that which separates and encloses, but rather in that which unites and opens, being openness itself. (Patočka unedited, 189)

c) *modernity*

The third movement of human life, therefore, is what makes humans truly human. It is a breakthrough to a rational and ethical “life in truth”. Can we find here an affirmation of Ricoeur’s statement that both Patočka’s philosophy and his activities for Charta 77 might be placed in line with the tradition of modern European rationalism? On the one hand, yes, an understanding of the rational and ethical life of the human subject is in the heart of Patočka’s philosophy. On the other hand, Patočka regards his defence of the subject’s rationality and responsibility as radically different from this modern rationalist tradition. At the end of his lecture series, Patočka stresses this difference as one of the main conclusions of his course:

Here phenomenology touched upon something that all modern humanism neglected, what that humanism lacks. Modern humanism thrives on the idea that humans are in some sense the heirs of the absolute [...], that they have a license to subjugate all reality, to appropriate it and to exploit it with no obligation to give anything in return, constraining and disciplining ourselves. Here phenomenology touched upon the fundamental problem of humanism, that humans become truly human only in this non-indifference to being, when being presents itself to them and presents itself as something that is not real and so also is not human, something that challenges them and makes them human. (Patočka 1998, 178)

In contrast to modern humanism, the human subject can only understand its own rational and ethical being, if it takes into consideration its de-centred position, if it surrenders itself to the world and to being, which are constituent to the subject in a way beyond the subject’s own understanding. Patočka has always elaborated on this view by making sharp contrasts with modern philosophy and modern culture, that located the subject in opposite to the world, in order to grasp and control it. Building on analyses by Husserl and Heidegger on the crisis of the modern sciences and on modern technological culture as *Gestell*, framing, Patočka vehemently criticises modernity (Patočka 1989c). In a text from the 1950s, he characterises modern culture as a “supercivilization”, a civilization that is radically and completely rationalised in all its domains, in such a way that everything becomes calculated, scheduled,

disciplined and manipulated (Patočka 1990c). All meaning has been reduced to calculable profit by "...a rationalism that wants to master things and is mastered by them." (Patočka 1996, 110) In his *Heretical Essays*, Patočka describes how modern civilization has unchained gigantic technological forces that have no orientation and finally unleash their powers in violence and war. Thus, nihilism, decadency and war are the dark outcome of modern rationalism.

A better understanding of human life can only be achieved through a radical break with this modern rationalism. A new breakthrough by the third movement of human existence is needed, a *metanoia*, that can uncover again the relation of man to the field of appearing, to being. From the viewpoint of modern instrumental rationality such a conversion can only be seen as an irrational movement, beyond calculation and self-interest, as a sacrifice.

In the sixth *Heretical Essay*, Patočka discusses this sacrifice as it comes to the fore in the front experience in the first World War, referring to testimonies of Ernst Jünger and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. At the deepest low of modern European culture, this experience of absurd atrocities opens up the possibility of profound understanding of human existence and its relation to Being. In this context, Patočka takes up the Heraclitan notion of *polemos*, unity in conflict, as a characterisation of Being. Being needs to be understood as a unity, but this unity can never be described from one and the same point of view, there are always conflicting powers and perspectives. In the middle of a devastating war, therefore, one can find a testimony of the real *polemos* of human life: there can be no unity without inner conflicts. These conflicts undermine a full comprehension of being and of human existence as one totality in one theory or system. Genuine rational insight in human life, according to Patočka, is exactly a denial of modern rationalism that tries to grasp and dominate the whole of reality (Patočka 1998, 178; Dodd 2011; 2015; Hagedorn 2016).

Nevertheless, in his defence of Charta 77 Patočka appeals to the modern notion of human rights, implicitly referring to Kant:

The idea of human rights is nothing other than the conviction that even states, even society as a whole, are subject to the sovereignty of moral sentiment. [...] ...already a hundred and eighty years ago, precise conceptual analysis made it clear that all moral obligations are rooted in what we might call a person's obligation to himself – which includes, among other things, the obligation to resist any injustice done him. (Patočka 1989d)

Although he elsewhere refers to the pre-modern sources of human rights (Patočka 1990c), this appeal at least shows a tension in his evaluations of modern culture.

2. Ricoeur

Despite differences in style and in subjects of research, the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur shows many similarities with the thought of Patočka. Ricoeur's early work, his phenomenology of the will, describes the tensions within the human subject of rational and irrational drives. The relation of consciousness to its own body shows its embeddedness in bodily, intersubjective and social structures, beyond its own influence and comprehension. Later, Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the subject consists of several works that culminate in his anthropological work *Oneself as another*, where he develops an ethical view on the subject and its personal identity. His approach of history and modernity, however, is very different from Patočka's perspective. These three features will be discussed in this section.

a) *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*

One of the first studies of Paul Ricoeur on the human being as an ethical subject is his phenomenology of the will. He uses Husserl's eidetic method, looking for a pure description of the will, but from the start he also recognizes that the first object of the will, one's own body, that is supposed to act according to the will, can never be completely guided or grasped by it. A phenomenology of the will has to start with the subject as an "I will", "je veux", which is an intentional relation: "I will this or that". The description of this intentional relation of consciousness in its practical functioning, is on all its levels confronted with the involuntary – with bodily needs and

desires, with emotions, habits, etc. – that does not entirely give in to the will, but remains a mystery. The human subject is not transparent. “The Cogito is broken up within itself.” (Ricoeur 1966, 14)

On the other hand, these involuntary aspects can only be recognized through the will. The voluntary and the involuntary, freedom and nature, consciousness and its object, are therefore always already intertwined:

[...] the initial situation revealed by description is the reciprocity of the involuntary and the voluntary. Need, emotion, habit, etc., acquire a complete significance only in relation to a will which they solicit, dispose, and generally affect, and which in turn determines their significance, that is, determines them by its choice, moves them by its effort, and adopts them by its consent. The involuntary has no meaning of its own. Only the relation of the voluntary and the involuntary is intelligible. (Ricoeur 1966, 4f.)

This reciprocity is described by Ricoeur on many levels throughout the book. He discerns three main phases of willed action: decision, actual movement and consent: “To say ‘I will’ means first ‘I decide’, secondly ‘I move my body’, thirdly ‘I consent’.” (Ricoeur 1966, 6) All these phases are described on three levels: Ricoeur starts with a general “pure eidetic description”, which is followed by descriptions of the lived bodily experience of performing and implementation, and finally by an analysis of the several steps of this enactment.

Ricoeur starts his phenomenological analysis of the decision with an eidetic description: “a decision signifies, that is, designates in general, a future action which depends on me and which is within my power.” (ibid., 43) Already with regard to pure reflection, he recognises a profound reciprocity within the subject. It is me who decides, as the French reflexive pronominal form of the verb indicates: “je me décide”. The fact that I relate my actions and my decisions to myself, presupposes a pre-reflective self-consciousness in which the self relates to itself. In willing and deciding I discover myself as my own possibility. In the temporal mode of the decision, its relation to the future, I find myself dispersed in time. In addition, my will, as it is part of a project, has to connect to the possibilities it finds in the world. These possibilities make the projected action possible, but also determine its limits:

The possibility of my action is determined by the *entire* actual order of events which presents my action with a point of application, that is, by a collection of prohibitions and opportunities, obstacles, and feasible routes. That is the world of the voluntary agent – a complex collection of resistances and opportunities, of walls and of ways. (Ricoeur 1966, 53)

In a way that is comparable with Patočka's asubjective phenomenology, although in perhaps a bit less radical manner, Ricoeur locates the human will and action in the world, as always already embedded in situations and horizons:

[...] the first possibility inaugurated by the will is not my own can-be but the contingent possibility that I open in the world by projecting acting in it; it is the can "be done" intended on the world, this world that always remains on the horizon of my choice like the field of operation of my freedom. (Ricoeur 2016, 56)

The will is not an arbitrary urge, it has its reasons and motivations. Here, again, activity and receptivity go together. Values and motivations are instances that move us to act. I encounter these values and reasons in my decisions, they form the course through which I decide and by which I legitimise my actions (Ricoeur 1966, 66-84).

Ricoeur finds the same ambiguity in the relation to our bodies. First of all, the existence as such of the body precedes my will, is involuntary. "The 'I am' or 'I exist' infinitely overwhelms the 'I think'." (ibid., 85) Our conscious will is embodied, is embedded in the body and cannot but act through it. On the one and, I live my body from within and "traverse" it in my actions, on the other hand the body has its own vital values and needs. These vital tendencies are much more complex than the usual distinction between pleasure and pain. At the root of choice, they introduce an ambiguity that leads to hesitation as a profound feature of decision (ibid., 110f.; Boyer 2010). Hesitation, attention and choice constitute the decision in a temporal process that is not completely transparent and that cannot be grasped in a pure eidetic reflection.

Ricoeur's analysis of the decision thus consists of three stages: a pure eidetic description, an account of the body with its largely involuntary needs and motivations, and an examination of the temporal performing of the decision; the latter two stages manifest the limits of the eidetic description.

The same threefold structure can be found in the other two phases of wilful action in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*: action and consent. Ricoeur starts the second phase with an eidetic analysis of intentional acts and movements. Then the spontaneous bodily constitution of the action by irretrievable emotions and habits is discussed, followed by an analysis of how our muscular efforts and our emotions and habits take place at the limit of our understanding of them. Through all these actions, our voluntary movements adjust to the powers that make them possible (Ricoeur 1966, 199-337).

In the third phase, which Ricoeur calls consent, the tendency of reflection to be total and transparent and to be its own source, is countered again by the involuntary. He starts with a pure description of consent, which is followed by the “experienced necessity” that shows itself in the first person singular, in my character, my unconscious and even my life. The way of consent, then, leads through an acceptance of its own finitude that can never be completely grasped rationally and gives rise to poetic expressions of this consent, in the myths of Stoicism and Orphism. Other myths are discussed in his later book *La symbolique du mal*.

These myths are answers to the limits of our rational self-understanding. Human freedom can only be understood well by means of limit-ideas, like Kant’s regulative idea, in which the unity of human existence is thought, through the experience of a dramatic duality. These limit-ideas take together in reciprocity the activity and receptivity of will and action, its consent and necessity, in short, the voluntary and the involuntary:

We need to recover a similar function for regulative ideas in relation to the originary phenomenological field. I will say therefore that there is a “human” signification, a signification of human unity, which is the *idea* of a motivated, incarnate, contingent freedom. [...] We have no access to this signification of the human as *one* except through the deciphering of the relations between the voluntary and the involuntary. It is therefore solely an intentional unity toward which the experience of a dramatic duality points. [...] Against this background, this horizon of unity, I live out the dramatic duality of being human. (Ricoeur 2016, 71)

In his early work, therefore, in a very different style, Ricoeur's phenomenological analyses of human freedom and will manifest an understanding of human existence which is remarkably similar to Patočka's asubjective phenomenology. Rational and ethical human life can only be understood against the background of fundamental structures of world and intersubjectivity (*cf.* Colin 1991).

b) *Oneself as Another*

Ricoeur's view on man as a rational and ethical agent is further developed in several works and reaches its summit in *Oneself as Another*. This is a rich and complicated study of the human being as an ethical person. The question "who is the human person?" is analysed and discussed on several levels: "Who is speaking? Who is acting? Who is recounting about himself or herself? Who is the moral subject of imputation?" (Ricoeur 1992, 16) Human self-understanding is thus examined on the level of language, action, narrative and morality. In the same manner as he did in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, Ricoeur steers a middle course between the modern self-positing *cogito* and its deposition: "the hermeneutics of the self is placed at an equal distance from the apology of the cogito and from its overthrow." (Ricoeur 1992, 4) Human self-understanding cannot do without the "I think", but its rational reflection is already embedded in and relates itself to layers of its existence that are not transparent. In his typical style, Ricoeur describes these tensions as dialectical relations between poles that presuppose each other, but cannot be reduced to each other.

Several dialectics are thus grafted on each other: firstly the relation of the I to itself in such a way that it never coincides with the self; secondly, the relation between sameness and selfhood; thirdly the relation between self and other:

To say self is not to say I. The I is posited – or is deposed. The self is implied reflexively in the operations, the analysis of which precedes the return toward this self. Upon this dialectic of analysis and reflection is grafted that of *idem* and *ipse*. Finally, the dialectic of the same and the other crowns the first two dialectics. (Ricoeur 1992, 18)

In his discussion of human identity from the perspective of language and action, Ricoeur has encountered several aporias that all have to do with the temporality of human existence. The human person is dispersed in time, without having a clear objective kernel that remains the same. Only narrative theory can deal with these aporias in a convincing way. It is through stories that we understand and identify ourselves. It is through narrative only that the temporal permanence of human existence can be understood. Theoretical approaches of personal identity have always been looking at an objective *what*: What is the human person? What am I? Narratives can answer the question: *Who* am I?

Ricoeur distinguishes two sorts of permanence in time: *idem* and *ipse*, sameness and selfhood. Sameness is what allegedly remains the same, selfhood is the active self-maintenance that cannot be objectively defined. In his description of sameness, Ricoeur takes up again his notion of character, which he also used in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Ricoeur 1992, 119-120) and describes it here as: “Character [...] designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized.” (Ricoeur 1992, 121) In his new analysis in *Oneself as Another*, character appears less immutable than in the previous works. A human personal character is actually changing and in development, but it manifests itself as durable and lasting, as if it does not change at all. It is the sedimentation of a personal self-realisation (*ipse*) that appears as if it has always remained the same:

[...] character is able to constitute the limit point where the problematic of *ipse* becomes indiscernible from that of *idem*, and where one is inclined not to distinguish them from one another. [...] ... precisely as second nature, my character is me, myself, *ipse*; but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*. (Ricoeur 1992, 121)

In other words, the identity of character is an expression of the adherence of the *what* to the *who*: “Character is truly the ‘what’ of the ‘who’.” (Ricoeur 1992, 122) Bodily dispositions, talents and capacities go together with circumstantial opportunities, upbringing and choices, in such a way that they lead to sustainable personal traits, a second nature.

Selfhood is the constant development of the self in relation to character. Ricoeur describes it as a self-maintenance [*maintien de soi*] by keeping one's word, keeping promises. Self-identity is not a given, it is a task that has to be accomplished. It does not make sense, therefore, to try to express personal identity in terms of "what". The question of personal identity can only be articulated in terms of "who": who am I? The answer to this question needs to be given in a story, a narrative, that also functions as an ethical account of oneself. Personal identity is developed in the plot and intrigue of a historical narrative, that, on the one hand, finds a coherence of actions and experiences, and, on the other hand, is open for new events and for moments of discontinuity. A narrative, as Ricoeur puts it in *Time and Narrative*, is a "concordance discordante." (cf. Ricoeur 1990, vol. I, 42-45, resp. 64-70) In narration, self-identification remains a dynamic process, in which the dialectics between *idem* and *ipse*, between sameness and selfhood, can develop. Through narratives, selfhood has to cope with the alleged given of character. Personal identity thus needs to be acquired at several levels: practices, life plans and life as a whole.

With regard to a comparison with Patočka's notion of the third movement, in which it is stated that human existence as a whole cannot be surveyed, we might ask whether, in Ricoeur's approach, a narrative can give an overview of life in its totality. Ricoeur recognizes several problems in this regard. Both historical and fictive stories have a beginning and an end, whereas we do not have experiences of the beginning and ending of our own life. In addition, we can tell different stories with varying plots about different life plans (our career, our family, our hobbies, etc). Can these stories be taken together in the emplotment of one encompassing life narrative? Ricoeur criticizes Alasdair MacIntyre for too easily accepting the unity of life in a biography. For Ricoeur it remains an open question, whether several life stories can be united in one biography (Ricoeur 1992, 175-180). The unity of one's personal identity is an infinite ethical task that can never be completely fulfilled (Rasmussen 1996).

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur introduces narrative as a way to combine descriptions of human behaviour by theories of action with a moral perspective. Storytelling appears as the bridge between description and prescription. It extends the field of praxis and can serve at the same time as a “laboratory for moral judgment.” (Ricoeur 1992, 140) In addition, our life story is told to others, as an ethical justification. In sort, self-maintenance by keeping one’s word, being accountable for others, is the kernel of our ethical selfhood. With a reference to Levinas, Ricoeur describes self-reference as an ethical response to the other: “...the idea of a response to the question ‘Where are you?’ asked by another who needs me. This response is the following: ‘Here I am’ [*me voici*], a response that is a statement of self-constancy.” (Ricoeur 1992, 165) Therefore, our narrative identity may be fragile, it is indispensable for our ethical responsibility. In this opposition Ricoeur sees a fruitful tension that needs to be understood in a dialectical manner (Waldenfels 1996).

Ricoeur makes a distinction between ethics and morality. Ethics refers to the orientation of the good life; morality to the implementation of this orientation in norms that pretend to be universal and imply the use of force. An Aristotelian teleological perspective is thus combined with a Kantian deontological perspective. Again, Ricoeur takes two approaches together in a dialectical style. There is a primacy of ethics over morality; the ethical orientation needs to pass the sieve of morality; and morality needs to be legitimized by ethics. Parallel to this distinction, Ricoeur divides the ethical self-understanding in self-esteem and self-respect. There is a primacy of self-esteem over self-respect; self-esteem receives the form of self-respect under a moral regime; if morality is confronted with aporias, self-respect serves as source and help for self-respect. (Ricoeur 1992, 170-171)

The ethical orientation is further divided in three relations: to the self, to the other and to many others, or, in Ricoeur’s own terms: in “...a view of the ‘good life’, with and for the other, in just institutions.” (Ricoeur 1992, 172) A thorough discussion of Ricoeur’s ethics, as it is developed in the 7th, 8th and 9th study of *Soi-même comme un autre*, exceeds by far the

limits of this article. As the triple distinction cited above already indicates, he tries to combine an Aristotelian, Kantian and Hegelian approach of ethics, in such a way that the many paradoxes and aporias can be made fruitful in dialectical analyses. A Kantian autonomy is preserved within the *Sittlichkeit* of institutional contexts, in such a way that it is "...entrusted to the practical wisdom of moral judgment in situation." (Ricoeur 1992, 274; Carter 2014)

Ricoeur's discussion of all these aspects of ethical selfhood culminates in the notion of attestation, the testimony we can give of ourselves, that needs to be trustworthy. The certainty I and others can have of myself, is a matter of trust. Reliability to the other, to whom I must be able to give an attestation, an account of myself, is the kernel of my self-understanding (Ricoeur 1991c; 2013; Greisch 1996).

So far, we can see many similarities in the philosophies of Patočka and Ricoeur. Human life is primordially embedded in natural and social horizons. What makes this life human, is the ethical call within these horizons and the rational manner of responding to them. Ricoeur was well aware of his proximity to Patočka. In a lecture he gave in Naples in 1997, he explicitly discusses these elements of Patočka's thought and their connection. He recognizes an elliptic and reciprocal relation between, on the one hand, Patočka's elaborations on the notion of the "natural" world in his a-subjective phenomenology, and, on the other hand, his reflections in the *Heretical Essays* on the meaning of history, that originates in a mythical pre-historical world. These two sides of Patočka's philosophy are related by presupposing a "fundamental pre-scientific and pre-historical anteriority", i.e. they are always already embedded in a natural and cultural world. (Ricoeur 2007, 193-217)

c) *modernity*

Critique of modernity as such, as it can be found in the work of Patočka, is not a theme for Ricoeur. He develops his thought in line with traditions of modernity, without feeling the need to recover ideas that were lost in modern philosophy and in modern culture. Patočka discusses modern culture as a supercivilization in such a way that he not only describes its inner conflict – between its radical and moderate forms – but denounces the whole principle *per se* of complete domination of reality. Such a radical opposition to modernity cannot be found

in Ricoeur's philosophy. To the contrary, in his introduction to the *Heretical Essays*, Ricoeur utters his concerns about Patočka's profound and radical criticism of modern culture: "...the strange, frankly shocking passages about the dominance of war, of darkness and the demonic at the very heart of the most rational projects of the promotion of peace..." (Ricoeur 1996, viii).

Ricoeur does discern inner conflicts in modern civilization, but only in order to make them fruitful in a dialectical fashion. To give an example, in the course of modernity, rationalism was first established and then tends to undermine itself by rational self-critique. This inner tension is taken by Ricoeur as a point of departure in *Oneself as Another*. He is looking for a dialectical route in between the *cogito* as posited by Descartes and the *cogito* shattered by Nietzsche. Furthermore, the ethical part of *Oneself as Another* is for a large part an elaboration on the tension between Kantian morality and Hegelian ethical *Sittlichkeit*. The whole discussion of personal identity, therefore, takes place in the framework of modern philosophy. In another example, the same goes for his work on recognition, in which Ricoeur in large measure elaborates on Hegel (Ricoeur 2005).

With regard to Ricoeur's views on communist totalitarianism – one of the main features of what Patočka calls supercivilization – a gradual change can be discerned. Ricoeur has always been in favour of socialist economic reforms, while at the same time defending individual human rights. He was very well aware of the profound problems of totalitarian communist states, like the Soviet Union and China, but he refused to take sides in a too simple antagonism between these totalitarian states and the so-called "free world". In his earlier works he pleads for internal reforms in the communist societies (Ricoeur 1955; 1991b). This attitude shifts, when it appeared to be impossible to alter these regimes from the inside into a "socialism with a human face". The violent suppression of the Prague Spring and the tragic death of Patočka, due to the regime's response to Charta 77, have certainly played a role in this change of thought. One can see a testimony of this

influence in the quotations from Ricoeur's commemoration of Patočka at the beginning of this article (Michel 2008).

Another target of Patočka's critique of supercivilization is modern technology. Again, this is not an issue that Ricoeur has reflected upon extensively, but neither is it absent in his work. In various articles, he recognizes the well-known tension between instrumental reason and ethical values, and mentions the urge to avoid a technocracy by democratic means. However, he always approaches these problems of modern technology as questions that need to be answered within the confines of modern culture (Kaplan 2003; 2011; Lewin 2012).

Conclusion

The comparison in this article has manifested that the work of Patočka and Ricoeur, despite huge differences in style and topics of research, contains a profound consensus in the understanding of the human being as a rational ethical person. Both philosophers regard humans as insurmountably embedded in natural, cultural, and intersubjective structures. By rational reflection we can and need to attain insight in this embedding, but this insight is finite. Therefore, we shall never be able to completely grasp all facets of our lives. This is, however, no reason to endorse irrationalism or scepticism. The finitude of our reflection is exactly the main reason to look for a rational understanding of our existence. Since our choices and our way of life are not self-evident, we need to reflect on them in order to give an ethical account of ourselves. Furthermore, reflection can show us how our being embedded in social and intersubjective structures implies ethical relations as constitutive for our existence. Patočka and Ricoeur have conceptualized this characterization of human life as, respectively, devotion and attestation. In devotion and attestation, humans can understand themselves as rational ethical persons.

The main difference of Patočka and Ricoeur lies in their evaluation of modernity. Whereas Ricoeur elaborates on major tensions and aporias in modern philosophy and culture, Patočka calls for a thorough reconsideration of modern rational

culture as a whole. His appeal to human rights, however, reveals a tension in his critique of modernity.

In conclusion, Ricoeur's claim that Patočka's view on the human being as a rational ethical subject is representative for modern European rationalism, can at least be seen as paradoxical. On the one hand, many aspects of Patočka's anthropological reflections and analyses, e.g. his view on human freedom and rationality, can easily be traced historically to developments in modern philosophy. On the other hand, he has explicitly and profoundly criticized main elements of modern civilization, especially its rationalism. Nevertheless, each in their own way, Ricoeur and Patočka have offered major contributions to our understanding of humans as rational ethical subjects, by revealing the essential role of devotion and attestation.

NOTES

¹ Author's translation from the French original; *cf.*: "Je n'hésite pas à discerner dans cet appel de Husserl un des relais par lesquels la présente revendication des libertés et des droits humains, à Prague, se rattache au grand rationalisme européen de l'âge classique, par-delà les socialismes du XIX^e siècle."

² "Il est difficile pour les intellectuels occidentaux, encore tout occupés à se déprendre du moralisme et à déconstruire la raison, de comprendre ce recours des intellectuels tchèques à la morale dans le champ même de la revendication politique."

³ "[...] le plaidoyer philosophique pour la subjectivité devient, dans le cas de l'extrême abaissement d'un peuple, le seul recours du citoyen contre le tyran."

⁴ Author's translation from the French edition: "Notre dynamique propre, l'élan qui nous porte vers les choses, trouve un pendant dans l'orientation du monde vers nous, dans les traits dynamiques originaires de l'espace..."

⁵ Author's translation from the French edition: "Avant que nous ne soyons en état de faire quoi que ce soit, le monde s'est déjà emparé de nous, le monde nous tient, dans et par notre disposition. Telle est la contribution de ce domaine au mouvement originaire que nous sommes – mouvement vers le monde, puis, à travers le monde, de retour à nous-mêmes. La disposition, « ou l'on en est », nous dit toujours déjà de la manière la plus générale que nous sommes au monde et *où* en lui nous sommes."

⁶ It is at this point that Patočka's existential phenomenology takes a turn that is different from Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment and intersubjectivity (*cf.* Evink 2013).

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Eddo Evink is Professor in Philosophy at the *Open University* in the Netherlands and Assistant Professor in History of Modern Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of the *University of Groningen*, the Netherlands. His main areas of research contain phenomenology, hermeneutics and philosophy of art. Some recent publications are: 'From Circumspection to Insight', in: Ondřej Švec and Jakub Čapek (eds.), *Pragmatic Perspectives in Phenomenology*, London: Routledge, 2017, 198-215; 'Horizons of Expectation. Ricoeur, Derrida, Patočka', in *Studia Phaenomenologica* XIII, 2013, 297-323.

Address:

Eddo Evink
Open Universiteit
Valkenburgerweg 177
6419 AT Heerlen
Email: c.e.evink@rug.nl