Surrender and Subjectivity:
Merleau-Ponty and Patočka on Intersubjectivity

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Abstract

In Jan Patočka's phenomenology of intersubjectivity one can find clear influences of Merleau-Ponty. By both philosophers intersubjectivity is seen as a form of reversibility that has a primacy above personal subjectivity. But Patočka adds to this idea of reversibility the notion of surrender or dedication. In this article it is demonstrated how Patočka's conception on surrender is developed in his idea of the three movements of human existence. Moreover, the understanding of intersubjectivity through surrender is presented as an important step towards an answer to several points of critique on Merleau-Ponty's views on intersubjectivity, that were brought to the fore by Claude Lefort. Finally, in this article several aspects of surrender are distinguished in order to give more insight in the functioning and effects of the third movement of human life.

Keywords: intersubjectivity, surrender, three movements of human life, openness, Merleau-Ponty, Patočka, Lefort

In his lectures of 1969, entitled *Body Community Language World*, Jan Patočka has given an elaborate description of his ideas on bodily existence and intersubjectivity (Patočka 1998). One can find a clear influence in these lectures of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to whom Patočka refers several times. Both emphasize the primacy of the body and of intersubjective bonds above subjective consciousness. But there is also a crucial difference between these two phenomenologists. Whereas Merleau-Ponty stresses the tension between the

reversibility and divergence of subjects, Patočka describes the relation between self and other as a relation of surrender and dedication.

In this text I shall first briefly sketch Merleau-Ponty's view on intersubjectivity and then discuss the criticism it evoked in, among others, his pupil Claude Lefort. In addition, the main part of my text will deal with Patočka, in order to show how in his philosophy solutions might be found that tackle the problems that Lefort had recognized in his critical reading of Merleau-Ponty.

1. Merleau-Ponty on intersubjectivity: reversibility and divergence

Merleau-Ponty develops his ideas on intersubjectivity, both in *Phénoménologie de la Perception* and *Le Visible et l'invisible*, in terms of reversibility. Human lives are always already intertwined in intersubjectivity and in one world. The phenomena do not appear before my consciousness and the consciousness of others separately, they appear before us. Just like in the perception by one individual person many perspectives slide into one another and are gathered together in the phenomenon, in a comparable way the perspectives of several subjects slide into each other in one world:

> "But we have learned in individual perception not to conceive our perspective views as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are brought together finally in the thing. In the same way we must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world. In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception." (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 405-406; 1989, 353)

The reversibility that Merleau-Ponty describes here, includes both a common world and an unbridgeable difference. This divergence is given in the fact that I can never experience the feelings and ideas of the other in the same way as he or she

experiences them. Despite all my sympathy with Paul, I can never feel his pain or sorrow, "… simply because Paul is Paul and I am myself." (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 409; 1989, 356) There are no definite limits between our perspectives that merge into one another, but at the same time our experiences are unmistakably different. Within the shared world that constitutes everything that occurs to me, there is also an inalienable experience of selfhood:

> "It is true that I do not feel that I am the constituting agent either of the natural or of the cultural world: into each perception and into each judgment I bring either sensory functions or cultural settings which are not actually mine. Yet although I am outrun on all sides by my own acts, and submerged in generality, the fact remains that I am the one by whom they are experienced…" (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 411; 1989, 358)

Therefore, in spite of the common roots of all subjects in the generality of one world, Merleau-Ponty even speaks of a lived-through solipsism: "There is here a solipsism rooted in living experience [*solipsisme vécu*] and quite insurmountable." (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 411; 1989, 358) In other words, there is not only reversibility and alliance between me and the other, but also divergence, deviation, segregation and otherness. Self and other emerge from an impersonal world (Madison 1981, 37-45).

In *Le visible et l'invisible* Merleau-Ponty emphasizes even more the primacy of the flesh and the chiasm out of which the other and the self can come to the fore. From this 'intercorporality' of seeing and being seen, touching and being touched, the other and the self arise, in such a way that the other is not alter ego, but they are two sides of the same world:

> "…the chiasm is that: the reversibility – It is through it alone that there is passage from the 'For Itself' to the For the Other – In reality there is neither me nor the other as positive subjectivities. There are two caverns, two opennesses, two stages where something will take place – and which both belong to the same world, to the stage of Being." (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 317; 1968, 263)[1].

2. Lefort's critique

Claude Lefort has criticized this approach of intersubjectivity in a lecture that is published as 'Flesh and Otherness' (Lefort 1990). In a short characterization of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts he sketches the flesh as a reversibility that is first of all understood as a form of sensibility. Like the body touches and is touched at the same time, the flesh is the belonging together of what can only afterwards be taken as separate. But the separation is there as well. Hence, "the human body is not only sensible to itself, it is outside itself, it is a stranger to itself." (Lefort 1990, 7) Lefort discerns a shift of emphasis in *Le visible et l'invisible* from reversibility to what Merleau-Ponty calls 'dehiscence', the splitting open of phenomena:

> "...in his working notes he stresses more and more the phenomenon of 'dehiscence'. Thus, what was first announced in terms of overlapping, homogeneity, and reversibility seems later to have to be qualified in terms of segregation, fission, and alterity." (Lefort 1990, 8)

Despite this shift in emphasis from reversibility to dehiscence, Lefort claims that there are specific elements of difference and alterity that are missing in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intersubjectivity. He discerns three problems, or better said: three sides of one problem.

1. The difference between subjects within the intersubjective coexistence involves more than the flipside of reversibility in lateral exchange. Lefort refers to the relation between a small child and an adult. For the child, the adult is not an alter ego, but a mediator between the child and the world, a mediator who does not stand at the same level. "What we should bring to light is the original asymmetry between the experience of the infant and that of the adult. For the infant, the other is not originally an alter ego." (Lefort 1990, 9) The infant, as a human organism, is usually prepared to see, but before he sees distinct,

single things, the look of the other opens the world for him, in a hierarchical relation: "The other […] gives something to be seen *from above*." (Lefort 1990, 9-10)

With reference to Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, Lefort tries to show that this asymmetry is related to distinctions in the realms of danger and morality. Reversibility is not only a matter of sense and visibility, but also of eating: "Eating supports the impulse to swallow up external being, and this impulse goes along with the feeling of being at risk of being swallowed up. […] There is a split between the good and the bad object." (Lefort 1990, 10)

The asymmetry between adult and child is illustrated by Lefort with the image of the pointing finger of the adult that shows the child its ways in the world. The relation of the infant to his parents and other adults is one that is dominated from the start by the adults, a domination that will leave its traces, even when the child has grown up and become an adult himself. "The infant is immediately, and even before coming into the world, taken into a web of wishes, expectations and fears of which he will never possess the meaning." (Lefort 1990, 10-11)

2. In the realm of speech and language Lefort discerns the same problems. Language is texture of relations and rules in which the child learns to find its way, with the help of others, even under direction of others.

> "How would it be possible to mask the function of the other in the initiation of the world of named things? The other gives names, and in a certain sense, introduces the child into the sphere of law whenever he says 'this is red, and not yellow' or 'this is house, and not a boat'." (Lefort 1990, 11)

Even more important, not only names of things are given to the child, the child itself is named.

> "To be named […] testifies of an original and irreducible transcendence. […] The divergence [*écart*] between my name and myself does not coincide with the divergence between me seer and me visible. The name was imprinted on me and at the same time bound to remain outside me, above me." (Lefort 1990, 11)

In short, what Lefort misses in Merleau-Ponty's view of intersubjectivity is the idea of the other as the third one, the mediator who guides from above the relations of reversibility between subject and world.

3. Finally, Lefort mentions that this criticism might help to enlighten the difficulties Merleau-Ponty encountered in his political analyses. According to Lefort, these political analyses lack a comparison of different types of social structures that would provide insight in the distinction between modern democracy and totalitarianism. (Lefort 1990, 12) These last remarks on politics are rather short, so I will not further discuss them in detail.

Matt Dillon, Gary Brent Madison and David Michael Levin react on this criticism and try to defend Merleau-Ponty in several ways. They all make useful and interesting remarks, but, in my point of view, they all seem to miss the main points of Lefort's critique, namely the asymmetry and the morality that comes with alterity and with social relations, that is inherent in the divergence within reversibility (Dillon 1990; Madison 1990; Levin 1990). Probably, using terms like 'asymmetry', 'morality' and 'alterity' make the reader think of a connection with Levinas,[2] but in Patočka's philosophy these notions are understood differently than in Levinas.

3.   Patočka

In the extended analyses of subjective and intersubjective existence in *Body Community Language World*, Patočka elaborates on many ideas of Merleau-Ponty. His view on subjectivity is actually very close to Merleau-Ponty. Patočka agrees with Merleau-Ponty on the primacy of the body, on the original reversibility between subject and world, and also on the primacy of the world and of intersubjectivity over against the subject. Nevertheless he clearly takes the perspective of the subject as his starting point.

The subject, the I, he writes, is a stream of centrifugal energy, always intentionally directed towards its environment.

This I, a primordial dynamism, as such never appears before me. If I reflect upon myself through introspection, I always find a 'me' that already has changed, that is not anymore the same as the original stream of energy. But before this reflection can take place, I already know myself, through my relations to the other, the Thou. For the I starts as a dynamism, but simultaneously the I is also that what this stream of energy discovers in return. This stream never really ceases, but

> "...in a certain sense this impetus returns to itself because it encounters a mirror – in entering the world, in moving away from itself, it encounters a place from which further continuation is a return to itself. This place is the other being – Thou." (Patočka 1998, 36)

The way the subject places itself in the world, has the structure of the Thou-I. It is not by accident that the Thou is mentioned here as first, before the I. For the mirror of the Thou changes the anonymous impersonal relations of the subject into a personal I, the Thou takes care of my personal recognition. The Thou, the other I, is always the main goal of my intentional orientations, he is, in Patočka's words, the focus of my world, its entelechy, its teleological idea. And the return to the self through the other is the first type of explicit reflection (Patočka 1998, 51). The analogy with Merleau-Ponty is very apparent when Patočka writes of the relation to the other as "… a mutual mirroring. I see and I am seen. I integrate this mirroring in myself." (Patočka 1998, 52)

But then, a few pages further, he makes an addition that leads his analysis beyond Merleau-Ponty. The relation Thou-I is a mirroring but also more than a mirroring, it changes, or at least it can change the subject in a profound way: "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) This specific characterization of the relation to the other, self-loss and finding oneself again, this is what Patočka calls elsewhere *surrender* or *devotion*. In German texts he uses the word *Hingabe*. Because of this relation of surrender, the life that I share with others in intersubjectivity is not a "…mere copying but rather mutual enrichment, increase." (Patočka 1998, 65)

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This notion of surrender has been further developed by Patočka in his idea of the three movements of human life. He discerns three main dimensions in human existence, which he describes as movements: the movement of rooting or anchoring, the movement of self-prolongation and the movement of breakthrough or truth.

first movement

The first movement is the movement of rooting, a belonging to the natural and social environment in which we live. We need to be accepted and at home in the world and we cannot but surrender to this need. Interestingly, Patočka's description of the first movement comprises the relation of adults and children that Lefort had asked attention for. Sinking roots is a shared movement that begins with the acceptance of a newborn baby, but continues when the child is grown up and has entered the world of the adults. The sharing has not changed during and after the growing up of the child, but the roles have changed:

> "The acceptance of the newborn into human warmth compensates for the separation of the body, for bodily individuation. Spiritual individuation, release into the world of the adults, does not mean leaving the instinctual affective moment behind; it is only a reversal of one's situation, a repetition of that movement, though no longer as accepting but as giving." (Patočka 1998, 149)

The different roles that Patočka discerns here between adult and child imply the hierarchy in the relations. In the second *Heretical Essay* Patočka also speaks of compensation, with reference to the fragment of Anaximander: the compensation of giving right (or justice) to each other and putting aside injustice. This compensation is understood by Patočka as a devotion: "This compensation takes place in all to whom this existence is devoted, whom it loves and whom it accepts in turn." (Patočka 1996, 30) The surrender that first passively, without knowing it, takes place in the child, is later actively performed by the parents and other adults who devote their energy to their children in feeding and raising them. In short,

in this first movement, "humans are beings for others." (Patočka 1998, 177)

second movement
The second movement contains the dimension of work, the dimension in which we have to take action in order to stay alive. In this domain our relations to others are characterized by self-interest, contracts, concurrence and conflict. But surprisingly, in the second *Heretical Essay* Patočka calls the second movement the movement literally the movement of self-surrender. On the one hand, we may see here a calculated self-denial that finally aims at a self-interest through rational behavior:

> "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)

On the other hand, work, which is the main aspect of the second movement, has to be understood as work that we do for others, which can also be seen as a sort of devotion: "Work is essentially this self-disposal of ourselves as being at the disposal of others." (Patočka 1996, 31) Although this last interpretation is possible, Patočka seems to have something else in mind. The disposal of others is first of all something that is necessary to stay alive. We have no choice but to work. "The fundamental trait of work, however, is that it is involuntary; we accept it under duress, it is hard, it is a burden." (Patočka 1996, 31)[3]

third movement
Another side of self-surrender, a more ethical one, and perhaps even the highest form of surrender, can be found in the third movement. In this movement we consciously relate to the world as a whole and to our existence as a whole. We start to search for a truth that lies beyond the usual opinions, a lasting truth. Although we are not able to definitively find such a truth, the search for it is essential for our lives. By breaking through the supposedly self-evident beliefs, we become aware of our relation

to the world, which is a relation of opening up, of letting things appear. This movement has several moral implications. Since our choices, patterns of behavior and worldviews are not self-evident anymore, we have to give an account of them. With the third movement begins our responsibility. Moreover, it shows us that our existence is not self-centered, it has to find its goal and meaning outside, in relation to others and to the world, in relation to being. Here we find the overcoming of self-enclosure. "Life is no longer its sole own purpose but […] there is the possibility of living for something else." (Patočka 1996, 37)

This is self-surrender in its highest form and in the ethical meaning of the word; not the calculating postponement of self-interest but the overcoming of self-interest, the effort to find our highest, moral and responsible self in a radical loss of self-interest.[4] In this movement we can really give up ourselves, lose ourselves and find ourselves again in a life that is devoted to what is of higher importance than we ourselves are. The real devotion here is an ontological devotion: it can be found in…

> "…life on the boundary which makes life an encounter with what there is, on the boundary of all that is where this whole remains insistent because something quite other than individual entities, interests, and realities within it inevitably emerges here." (Patočka 1996, 39)

Human life needs to be understood in relation to Being, as having a task in its relation to the field of appearance: "Humans, the universal beings and beings of the *universum*, are *called* to things, to give them what they lack, to make that encounter possible. […] …human life is a service." (Patočka 1998, 170)

In his Afterword to a new edition of his dissertation, after 33 years, in 1969, Patočka describes life in the third movement as a life in the movement of surrender:

> "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)

As a surrender or devotion, dedication, *Hingabe*, to Being, the human subject finds the real meaning of its existence in an openness to Being, in letting things be, i.e. in its relation to the field of appearing. This self-surrender is, literally, a giving up of its own singular interests, a giving-oneself-away, a being outside of oneself, in the world which is the center of our existence.

Life in dedication and surrender is, in its own way, eternal, according to Patočka, because it participates in truth and in a community of people that transcend their particular interests and self-centeredness. According to Patočka, the transcendence in surrender is an essential moment in intersubjectivity:

> "Life that gives itself up lives outside itself, and the authenticity of this 'outside itself' is attested precisely by what it gives itself up to. It thus begets a community of those who understand each other in surrender and devotion, and, through the negation of separate centers, cement a fellowship of dedication, a fellowship in devoted service, which transcends every individual. The goal Husserl meant to attain with his phenomenological reduction as a fact achievable in philosophical reflection is in reality a result of the communication of existences: their transcending into a chain of beings united not merely by an external link, of beings which are not mere islands of life in a sea of objectivity, but for whom things and objects emerge from the ocean of being in the service of which they communicate." (Patočka unedited, 190)

In a few of his latest texts, Patočka has described this dedication and surrender of subjects to the appearance of phenomena, their testimony of ontological difference, in terms of love:

> "Et la compréhension principale demeure : l'Être n'est aucune chose, aucun être, mais ce qui ouvre les choses et les êtres, ce qui se les rassemble par la force invincible de l'amour ; et la place de l'amour n'est pas au milieu des choses et des contenus du monde, mais auprès de l'Être immortel. L'Être n'est pas ce que nous aimons mais ce par quoi nous aimons, ce qui donne à aimer, sur le fondement de quoi nous laissons être les choses ce qu'elles sont, nous voyons leur consistance en elles-mêmes et ne les rapportons pas primordialement et par principe à nous." (Patočka 1985)

Here we see how Patočka develops, through elaborating on the idea of surrender, an ontology of love. It seems that this is one of the elements of Patočka's philosophy that indicate an important influence of the Christian tradition. What he writes on surrender, dedication and love fits directly in his description of the Christian phase of the history of the care of the soul in the fifth *Heretical Essay*. This Christian heritage is transformed into a secularized ontology of love, but bears unmistakably Christian traces. In other words, if we look at its relation to the history of philosophy or the history of ideas, Patočka's philosophy shows to be remarkably different from Merleau-Ponty.

Also in his later work one can recognize how the movement of surrender is further developed in the notion of sacrifice. For Patočka, sacrifice has become a form of surrender that in late modernity, in technological culture, is needed to find again this surrender itself as that what makes us human. For in a technological culture a gift of love can only be understood as leading beyond the calculation that governs the appearance of all things.

In short, in Patočka's phenomenology surrender means in the first movement a mutual accepting of life and of human warmth through passive acceptance by infants and an active giving by adults; in the second movement a self-surrender that aims at self-prolongation; and in the third movement surrender in service of 'something' higher: a surrender in relation to Being and truth.

4. Surrender in the third movement

If we take a closer look at the passages in which Patočka writes on the third movement of human life, and if we develop them further with the help of the notion of surrender, we might discern several stadia of surrender in this movement:

First of all it is a surrender to uncertainty, to the attitude of asking radical questions that will never be entirely answered. Our views of life are uncertain, the quest for truth shows us the indeterminacy of Being, and instead of a firm

foundation we find *polemos* in our relation to Being/ Being and our existence are not given in one clear view – and we have to accept this.

However, we cannot live for a long time in such existential uncertainty. We have to return to everyday life and make our choices and decisions. Therefore, we have to adhere to principles that we can never completely justify with rational argumentation, but that we want to cling to. Since we find them at the end of our argumentations, as principles that found and guide our justifications, without being justified themselves, we do not really choose these principles, we are convinced by them. This is a second aspect of surrender in the third movement: a dedication to convictions and principles that are part of what Richard Rorty calls our 'final vocabulary' (Rorty 1989). We know that others may be convinced by other principles, but still we insist that our principles cannot be given up.

Here we may find the core of the intersubjectivity Patočka is looking for and that he referred to with the well known but not easy to understand expression 'solidarity of the shaken'. Even though we may not share the same principles with our fellow humans, we must be able to understand, accept and respect each other in the mutual recognition of being shaken. The mutual recognition of surrender and dedication is what shapes and develops a rational intersubjectivity on the basis of a more basic corporeal intertwining.

There is perhaps one thing, however, that we can never give up, because it is the very precondition of this intersubjectivity, i.e. the openness itself towards the Being of things, the openness in which we can let phenomena be what they are and the way they are. Here we find the political relevance of this idea of intersubjectivity. We have to surrender to and accept the necessity of openness in our relation to each other, to other human beings. This is incompatible with the idea of one truth and one political direction that can lead to several forms of totalitarianism.

This political relevance of Patočka's understanding of intersubjectivity – that was, as far as I know, never explicitly expressed by himself – may provide what Lefort was looking for in his political philosophy and that he missed in Merleau-

Ponty: i.e. the recognition of openness as the empty center of the political order of society, the recognition of openness that has to secure the difference between democracy and totalitarianism. Of course this principle is not enough to build a political philosophy on, but it is an indispensible element of the foundations of politics and political theory.

5.   Conclusions

It was the aim of this article to show how Patočka's idea of surrender can be seen as an important addition to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intersubjectivity. The relation between self and other has to be understood as emerging from a preceding unity that can be named as reversibility, flesh, chiasm. This unity is a primordial merging of coherence and dehiscence. From the start this reversibility includes hierarchy, morality and all kinds of rules. A higher and more developed intersubjectivity needs to be reached through a conscious and radical questioning and consideration of the traditional forms and institutions of these asymmetries and moral values. Such a level of intersubjectivity can only be reached if the relation between self and other is understood and realized by way of surrender and dedication, by overcoming all kinds of self-interest.

What Lefort was missing in Merleau-Ponty's view of intersubjectivity, therefore, can be found in Patočka's understanding of it: the asymmetry of the relation between children and adults; the specific understanding of moral dimensions of this asymmetry and of intersubjectivity as such; and finally the political consequences that may be derived from the uncertainty that is inherent in the third movement of human life and that is directly related to the crucial notion of surrender and dedication in Patočka's view of human life.

NOTES

[1] For a discussion of the development in Merleau-Ponty's thought of the relation between self and other and the appearance of the other, from *La Phénoménologie de la Perception* to *Le visible et l'invisible*, see Barbaras (1991, 51-58, 277-305).

[2] In the collection of Johnson and Smith (1990, 51-110) this connection is discussed in several articles.

[3] Of course there is, in the description in the *Heretical Essays*, also another surrender, the reverse side of every day work, namely the surrender to the demonic and orgiastic, the surrender to *eros*. But however interesting this may be, I leave it aside now.

[4] I think it is significant that here, with regard to the shift from the second to the third movement, Patočka refers less to Merleau-Ponty and more to Hannah Arendt (cf. Patočka 1996, 37-38).

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