

**J. Pavlik: On Patocka's Conception of the 'Ideal Genesis' of
Language**

Abstract:

In the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patocka, the term 'ideal genesis' refer to the necessary, essential or ideal conditions for the possibility of the empirical process of the arising of language in man. Patocka asserts that man in statu nascendi (resp. the child) must necessarily become aware of his being-in-the-world in order to be able to understand the meanings of words and to enter into symbolic interactions.

Keywords: life-world, empty intention, horizon, being-in-the-world, the first meaningful utterances, spontaneous order

I shall concentrate here on the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patocka's account of the 'ideal genesis' of language in the last part of his work *Life-World as a Philosophical Problem*,¹⁾ which is an attempt at the application of the phenomenological method to the solution of the problem of the origin of language. It seems to be needless to stress that the solution of this problem would be a decisive step forward in the cognitive sciences. For instance, if we admit that language could not arise as a consequence of human intentions,²⁾ then this implies the creative powers of nature somehow enabled the establishing of language in the form of a spontaneous order.

The difficulty of our problem consists in the fact that it cannot be investigated with empirical methods. Just as the human individual is not able to recall in his memory the arising of his speech ability, so there are no direct memories of this process in the collective memory of mankind. The application of the methods of empirical psychology to the development of speech abilities in the child is not related to the problem of the origin of language as such, because the child acquires language as a ready-made system. This is why Patocka believes that the empirical investigation of the arising of speech abilities must be replaced with an investigation of what he calls the 'ideal genesis' of language.

In Patocka, the term 'ideal genesis' refer to the necessary, essential or ideal conditions for the possibility of the empirical process of the arising of language in man. It implies that this process can be understood as a way of the unfolding of the above mentioned ideal conditions into an actual process proceeding in time. Patocka also assumes that the unveiling of the 'ideal genesis' of language through phenomenological methods will give the empirical inquiry of the arising of speech abilities in the child a deeper, essential foundation.

The starting point of the unveiling of the ideal genesis of language is the eidetic intuition of the essence of the phenomenon of speech acts as experienced in the process of communication. According to Patocka, the essence of speech acts is to be a specific kind of intentional acts,

characteristically consisting in the presentation of something that is not given presented in perception. Naturally, in our speech acts we are also able to intend the meanings of things which are actually perceived. Let us concentrate above all on judgements or assertions. Patocka embraces a correspondence theory according to which the truth of a judgement in the primary sense amounts to the adequacy of the meaning of the judgement to the object or situation as given in perception. This implies that a judgement concerning something which is not actually perceived can be understood as true only if the corresponding speech act is even here still related to some similar structure at the level of perception.³) Each act of perception somehow comprehends a layer which is analogous to the presentation of something which is not present. Speech acts, then mirror this layer in our acts of sensual perception.

Patocka (together with other phenomenologists) explain these theses in the following way: in the frame of our sensual perception, we immediately understand the sense of actually perceived objects, but this sense necessarily comprehends the anticipation of something that is not actually perceived. Thus a full understanding of our perception of the moon must include the fact that such perception presupposes the anticipation of its dark side which is not actually perceived; however, this dark side is able to become immediately perceived. Similarly, the understanding of the way a place is given in perception comprehends the anticipation of the ways which connect this place to other places, with our home, etc.

Thus, we are able to understand the sense of perceived objects only if actual perceptions refer to anticipated or possible perceptions. Phenomenologists say that the full intention of actual perceiving is necessarily connected with so-called 'empty intentions' which can be filled out through further, i.e. possible experience. These empty intentions comprehend also certain necessary schemes of possible experience which coincide with the ontological schemes of reality. In line with phenomenological terminology, it can be also said that every actually perceived section of reality is surrounded by a horizon of possible experience and that the sense of all actual perceptions can be understood only in the frame of this horizon. Consequently, the acquaintance with the horizon as a whole is a necessary precondition of the understanding of the sense of each single objects experienced within it.

Moreover, if phenomenologists define the world as the horizon of all horizons, then it is man's acquaintance with the ontological scheme of the world as a whole which is the precondition of his understanding of the sense of objects. (There should be added that in Patocka, the ontological scheme of the world contains not only formal a priori structures, but also some characters of material a priori, e.g. home.) Being an immediate and therefore unreflected part of all acts of perception, this prior acquaintance with the ontological scheme of the world comes to be unfolded only in philosophy.

The character of man, that he can grasp single objects only against the background of this scheme of the world as a whole and, therefore, he is able to transcend the sphere of immediate perceptions, can be referred to by means of the term 'being-in-the-world'.

Developing Husserl's conception of transcendental intersubjectivity, Patocka stresses that the constitution of the ontological scheme of the world necessarily involves man's experience of other human beings. According to Patocka, we are not able to understand the world as a whole without understanding our immediate relations to other people. What, now, of language? Speech acts as conceived by Patocka necessarily presuppose man's being-in-the-world as a basic, pre-verbal form of the presenting of that which is not present. Hence the intersubjective relations which participate in the constitution of the ontological scheme of the world must also be pre-verbal. The original experience of our neighbour manifests itself in such affective relations as sympathy and antipathy, in the phenomena of our immediate sharing wants and impressions with the other, in variety of immediate forms of co-operation, and in variety of

primitive forms of self-asserting through the *modus imperativus* of our behaviour. All such immediate intersubjective relations amount, now, to necessary conditions of speech acts.

Being-in-the-world as being constituted in affective intersubjective relations is also a necessary condition of language, because Patocka regards language as derived from speech acts. For Patocka, language is an enduring and objectivized sediment of those processes of communication which are individual speech acts; the term "sediment" means that individuals find words and grammatical structures at their disposal as something ready-made.⁴) The grammatical structure of the language thereby sedimented is an important way in which the ontological scheme of the world, previously only diffusely apprehended, becomes articulate. According to Patocka, this implies that there must exist a universal grammar reflected in the structure of all languages, because different languages are related to the same world as experienced in our acts of perception.

Patocka, now, investigates the necessary conditions of language in order to discover such issue which most closely refers to the possibility of the arising of the first meaningful utterances. In so doing, he stresses that he does not look for the *causa efficiens* of this arising; rather, he wants to establish its sufficient condition.

Patocka states that affective (non-verbal) forms of communication can be found also in animal behaviour. Consequently, our affective life with others, which can manifest itself purely in the form of instinctive signals (cries, etc.), is not a sufficient condition of the arising of speech acts, because these involve an understanding of the meaning of words. E.g., individual's imperative self-assertion against the other can be expressed in the form of an instinctive signal or in the form of the suggestion of a direct action. Similarly, man's being-in-the-world as has been considered until now cannot be the sufficient condition of the arising of human utterances. Patocka believes that animals, too, live in their own worlds. The world of animals is much more primitive than our world, though animals, too, are able to go beyond the sphere of actual perception through the mediation of associations, memories etc.

Patocka however maintains that all these psychicooccurrences are purely passive and that the activity of the animal is entirely confined to reactions to actual, i.e. present stimuli. The animal is not able to unveil spontaneously the horizons of possible experience. The "sense" of the animal's existence is prescribed by the periodicity of its vital impulses; this means that the animal's world is, in a sense, something that is imposed upon animal.

In contrast to this, however, the sense of man's existence is not prescribed; it is characteristic of man, that his world must be created in man's free activity. It is just the fact that the sense of man's existence comprehends his understanding of the world as a whole implies his free and active relation to the world. Man is not given any predestinated intelligible character; rather, he has the ability through free choice to create his world in the frame of his affective tendencies. Patocka says that it is the ability to create or at least the necessity of free choice which is imposed upon man.

Patocka now asserts that it is precisely this difference between the animal's and man's relation to the world which is the sufficient condition for the arising of language in man. This conclusion he applies in relation to the investigation of the arising of the first meaningful (truly linguistic) utterances in the psychic development of the child.

Patocka asserts that the child must necessarily become aware of its human freedom in order to be able to understand the meanings of words and to enter into symbolic interactions. At least, there must be something like a flash of this awareness in the child's mind, in consequence of which, the child demonstrates that it is able to dispose of its own potencies and forces, be it

with respect to things or with respect to other people. The child thereby starts to be delivered from its immediate vital tendencies, which means that its actual perceptions do not immediately result in instinctive actions. A part of the activity of the child is transformed into the active disposing of non-perceived reality, i.e., precisely, of the elements of the horizon of its possible experience. This coincides with the activation of empty intentions which amount to the basic structures of man's being-in-the-world. Through the active presenting of the structures of possible experience, the child comes to be able to understand the perspectives which objects reveal in perception just as the perspectives of a self-identical object which is independent of our actual experience. (Which is self-identical is thereby independent of our actual experience.) This means that the child starts to be able to understand the sense of perceived reality as independent of its actual perception and to incorporate this sense into the meaning of words. In uttering the word, the child realizes not only its free ability to dispose of things, but also its free ability to attract the attention of others to those very things.

The child sees the thing and hears the corresponding word. The same word then accompanies new perceptions of the corresponding thing. In this way the child is able to enter into an active relation to what had previously been a matter of mere passive association. The feeling of acquaintance with the thing is then transformed into meaning. The result of this transformation constitutes the core dimension of the meaning of words, which allows them to be applied not just in the individual case but also in general.

If the word accompanies new identifications of the corresponding thing, then it means that child is able to enter into active relation to the previous knowledge as comprehended in the association evoked by the perception of that thing. Through this active relation, the child's feeling of being acquainted with that thing (such feeling is connected with the passive or pre-human form of association) constitutes the general dimension of the meaning of the word. Thus, through the child's active transcending of the sphere of actual perceptions, its formerly pre-human associations become the starting point of subsumption.

The child now starts to play a game with the meanings thus caught up in *statu nascendi*. This game results in the discovering of the fact that every thing has its own name, or in the discovering of the function of name-giving.⁵) According to Patocka, this great discovery is the very awakening of the human mind in its entire exuberance; it enables people to articulate and later to reflect upon their previous acquaintance with the world as a whole, an acquaintance which arose from the flash of awareness of man's freedom.

Patocka's conception of the ideal genesis of language is, I think, inspiring, but it suffers from all the inconsistencies of Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity and its slightly modified version in Heidegger's conception of 'being-with-others'. (The primary issue of these inconsistencies is, naturally, Kant's transcendental philosophy.)

In Patocka, the basic problem consists in the accounting for the connection between intersubjective relations and the flash of freedom which suddenly wells up in the psyche of the child or in the psyche of the immediate predecessor of man. (In Patocka, this connection can be understood formally as a relation between necessary and sufficient condition.) Affective (pre-verbal) intersubjective relations as conceived by Patocka cannot as a matter of principle result in the flash of freedom because they remain at the level of animal life. Freedom, transcendence, activity and creativity on the one hand and passivity and immanence on the other have no common denominator. The dichotomy between the two is similar to the dichotomy between the *etre pour soi* and *etre en soi* in Sartre, which seems to be in a contradiction with evolutionary approach. From the formal point of view, however, Patocka's conception is not inconsistent. He directly says that the tendency to become free is itself an affective attitude of man; this means that the flash of freedom, as well as language as a developed form

thereof belong to the essence of man and as a phenomenologist confines his aim only to the description of the essential features of man's development. But, as will be shown, it is precisely this point of view which leads to unmaintainable consequences.

Patocka's conception of human essence is influenced by Heidegger who regarded human essence as *Existenz*, i. e. as an act of transcendence which concerns nature and every fixed forms of humaneness; the human essence as *Existenz* is more or less apparently incorporated in every human individual. Simultaneously, the act of transcendence is understood as essentially finite - it means that the empirical individualizations of the Heideggerian *Existenz* as a generic essence of man must necessarily depend on the bio-psychic nature of our body and on society. (They are not created by the self-limitation of the absolute subject as e. g. in Fichte.)

In Heidegger, the dependence of the *Existenz* on society is conceived as a self-forgetting (or alienation) of the *Existenz* under the pressure social norms (*das man*). In Patocka, the "flash of freedom" is prior to genuine human relations. (It is obvious because the "flash of freedom" is a transcendental basis for these relations.) This is why in Patocka, the necessary conditions for the development of the "flash of freedom" into the being-in-the-world are non-human, instinctive intersubjective relations. In both cases, the individual act of transcendence is prior to the human type of social relations.

This implies that both in Heidegger and Patocka the individualizations of freedom as man's generic essence depend solely on the bio-psychic nature of human individual - as if nature created man directly in the form of a free individual being which is independent of both nature and society.

In Patocka, neither the individualizations of man's essence as freedom nor the language which arises from these individualizations depend on really human intersubjective relations such as moral norms and rules.⁶⁾ Consequently, nor the historical origin of language depends on the arising of these relations.

Such an understanding of the essence of man is at variance with the well-known conception of Aristotle according to which man's social reality is ontologically prior to the individual form of his existence.⁷⁾ In Aristotle, man is characterized by his ability to understand what is the good and evil and what is right and wrong. This ability is substantially connected with the social character of man. Aristotle stresses that just this character (with all of its ethical and legal dimensions) is reflected in language; namely, the basic function of language is the expression of man's social values such as justice and morality. This means that in Aristotle, man as *ZOON LOGON ECHON* is possible only as *ZOON POLITIKON*.

Now, I should like to outline a possible way of the correction of Patocka's conception of the ideal genesis of language. At the first instance, this task involves an explanation of the connections among language, freedom and human inter-subjective relations.

Following Aristotle, we can assume, that nature created man with his speech abilities through the mediation of an establishing of primitive pre-human social structures. Starting from Patocka's notion of the non-verbal affective forms of imperative behaviour, we can also assume that it was an instinctive imperative behaviour in its various collective forms, which was the most important type of inter-subjective relations in those social structures. A mutual character of instinctive imperative behaviour must be assumed, too. This means that there is no constant majority of the members of pre-human horde applying a form of collective imperative with reference to a constant minority; rather, the members of the horde hold each other at bay.

The *modus imperativus* of inter-subjective relations is originally mediated through sound signals; these sound signals are accompanied with an immediate suggestion of punishment. If such a signal is so effective as to be able to suppress the transition of individuals' actual

instinctive tension into the corresponding bodily action, then this results in the presentation of possible, desired but prohibited action. The presentation of possible or anticipated action in individual's psyche is kept up with the lasting instinctive tension which lasts because of its being unsatisfied. This lasting tension suggests incessantly (or, so to say, obsessantly) the structure of the prohibited action, i.e the structure of its own natural continuation. And it is just the matter of the sound of the imperative signal which enables the fixing of the presentation of possible or anticipated action. Namely, through a further development (repetitions, associations etc.), the structure of the desired but imperatively prohibited action becomes integrated with the matter of the sound of the imperative signal and turns into its primitive meaning. In such a way, the signal is transformed into a meaningful word.

Thus, the suppressed (or "tabu") action as comprehending all of its inner and external ("objective") components is transformed into the horizon of possible or anticipated experience; it is necessary to stress that possible or anticipated experience is presented only through the mediation of meaningful words.

Consequently, the ontological structure of the world is derived from the structure of possible actions in their entirety. A universal grammar, too, is then derived from the structure of possible actions.

Seen from this perspective, Patocka's notion of a socially unconditioned "flash of the awareness of freedom" should be replaced with the notion of the suppression of the transition of instinctive tension into the corresponding bodily action.

It means that the arising of human freedom is essentially connected with the intersubjective or social character of that suppression which is nothing but the first moral norm. This moral norm arises spontaneously and its general validity is based upon the mutual character of imperative behaviour.

The spontaneous arising of language is thus inseparable from the spontaneous arising of moral order. The meaning of the first word involves both the prohibiting norm and the structure of prohibited action with all of its inner and external components.

This conclusion seems to be compatible with Aristotle according to whom the basic function of language consists in the expression of ethical meanings and social values. It is also in harmony with Hayek's theory of spontaneous order.

Appendix

The main conclusion of my inquiry can be regarded as compatible with some aspects of Kant's theory of categorical imperative; in Kant, human freedom as freedom from man's inner nature is possible only as mediated through moral norm which suppresses this nature.

Nevertheless, Kant's categorical imperative is also a condition for man's being free from society and it is just this aspect of Kant's moral philosophy which is the source of the mistakes in Patocka's (and also in Heidegger's) approach.

Being influenced with Kant's conception of a-historical transcendental a priori and identifying man's freedom from nature with his freedom from society, Patocka cannot admit that freedom could arise as mediated through a spontaneously arisen positive moral norm.

It should be said explicitly that man's freedom from nature is not identical with his freedom from society. Man's becoming free from his society in the form of an active emancipation from traditional and inherited norms and ways of living started long after his

becoming free from nature, namely in ancient Greece where the principle of political autonomy based on a rational interpretation of reality was applied at first.

But, Patocka's notion of human essence conceived as "the free choice of the sense of human existence" (this unequivocally implies man's freedom from social norms) cannot be related to people living in primitive or traditional societies in which the principle of political autonomy is not applied; namely, those societies do not enable their members such a free choice. Patocka's notion of human essence necessarily leads to a Hegelian conception of the alienation of man's essence in traditional resp. non-European societies, which is hardly acceptable. (In his later development, Patocka really comes to such a Hegelian way of the understanding of traditional societies - he conceives them as not yet fully developed forms of the a priori life-world. Under the influence of Hegel, Patocka also enriches his concept of the life-world with three basic kinds of human relations, i.e. with family, working and political relations. But, these relations presuppose a previous development of language and therefore do not participate in its arising.)

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- 5) Patocka here makes a reference to L. Landgrebe, *Nennfunktion und Wortbedeutung*, 1934, pp. 104-108.
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- 7) Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

