

Joanna FEMIAK

Józef Piłsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw

## **Corporeality as Horizon and Source of Human Experience – on the Basis of Jan Patočka’s Works**

### **Abstract**

Jan Patočka’s works formed a part of the current of phenomenological considerations and they deserve special attention – among others, because of the role attributed to corporeality in the process of cognition and its interpretation as an internal horizon putting in order the process and content of perception. They constitute also a significant contribution to considerations on the conception of the cognizing subject created by philosophy. Patočka is little-known in Poland, rarely translated and underappreciated as a philosopher who dedicated a lot of place to human corporeality in his works.

**Keywords:** corporeality, subject philosophy, phenomenology, internal experience.

Phenomenology appeared in the time of a crisis of philosophy – emptiness after positivism. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy got its second wind. The conception of science as a set of facts started to be criticized and the significance of reflection on cognition and the cognizing subject was increasing. Passive observation stopped to be sufficient, the cognizing subject and his input into cognition provoked more and more questions. Phenomenology filled that gap, inquiring the subject’s cognitive abilities and his determinants.

Jan Patočka’s works formed a part of the current of phenomenological considerations and they deserve special attention – among others, because of the role attributed to corporeality in the process of cognition and its interpretation as an internal horizon putting in order the process and content of perception. They constitute also a significant contribution to considerations on the conception of the cognizing subject created by philosophy. Patočka is little-known in Poland, rarely translated and underappreciated as a philosopher who dedicated a lot of place to human corporeality in his works.

The conception of the cognizing subject is, on the one hand, determined by development of philosophy of science, but – on the other hand – it is rooted in anthropological thought, which develops somehow parallelly and is inspired by science, while science is inspired by philosophy (which can be exemplified by Antonio Damasio's considerations). That feedback causes that there appear more and more works written by neurologists inspired by philosophy or by philosophers inspired by neurology, physics or psychology. However – when we look at the model of the subject of cognition in science – the majority of changes and disputes concerns his/her epistemological abilities, their sources and consequences, as well as the question what the subject is able to grasp with his perception and what he is not able to cognize. The cognizing subject's epistemological abilities usually are rooted not only in the vision and the definition of scientific theorems, but also in the vision of his body, soul and relations between them<sup>1</sup>. It is worth noticing that some changes have been influencing the conceptions of science and the scientific attitude since 1935 and they have started to entail changes in the ways of understanding the model of the cognizing subject which is shaped by science. Achievements of neurology and depth psychology also started to go beyond the narrow framework of the scientific attitude<sup>2</sup>.

Patočka, while writing about the human being, creates his own model of the cognizing subject where the body plays the key role. Corporeality is an important area of the cognizing subject because it places him in space and makes the subject's life spatial. The body somehow actualizes the relation between the subject and other things. There are many things and the cognizing subject's corporeality is the only constant point of reference.

That vision of corporeality distances Patočka from purely intellectual conceptions of the cognizing subject, introduction of the body as the subject's active realm do not permit ignoring such his abilities as sensitivity, movement, effort, emotions.

In the present paper I would like to focus my attention on cognitive functions of corporeality which are described by Patočka – they constitute the foundation of his anthropology and they can become an inspiration for philosophers and students of the theory of the human body.

Patočka's conception of the cognizing subject somehow begins from his corporeality, it describes relations with the external world and it comes back to

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Czarnocka, *Podmiot poznania a nauka [Cognizing Subject and Science]*, Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Warszawa 2003, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> In 1935 H. Reichenbach decided to separate the issue of emotions in scientific cognition from issues connected with science, its method and content. In order to achieve that aim, he referred to the idea of J. Herschel, who in his "Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy", which was published in 1830, proposed to analyze science from the two separate viewpoints, which he called "the context of discovery" and "the context of justification", M. Tempczyk, *Poznanie naukowe a emocje [Scientific Cognition and Emotions]*, [in:] *Wiedza a uczucia [Knowledge and Emotions]*, ed. by A. Motycka, IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2003, p. 242.

corporeality – and it should be emphasized that the coming back is necessary. Patočka – in order to make his inquiries clear and emphasize uniqueness of the human nature – often compares his views with those of Sartre and Heidegger, referring to the main existentialist notions of “being” and “being of things”. Material things are in space, they can be treated as spatially localized – that is, they have their own place, weight, volume – but corporeality of the cognizing subject, an active subject, cannot be composed only of his/her objective, geometrical relations, as it is in the case of things. Activity and a cognitive attitude to the external world are that what makes human corporeality different from other things.

Patočka emphasized an active dimension of human corporeality, which – somehow because of its own nature – perceives the world through senses, neurons, unconscious mechanisms of spatial perception. In that way he becomes a part of the philosophical tradition which opposes treating the body as something passive and not involved in cognitive processes.

One of the main functions of the cognizing subject’s corporeality is its placement in space. It is something that cannot be attained by a pure, intellectual, spiritual “I” – such a spiritual “I” cannot be anywhere in space. The fact that “I” is „closed in space” by corporeality consequently establishes his limits, separate him from other beings. According to Patočka’s opinion, the body causes that on the one hand I can think of myself as a separate being and, on the other hand, of others as beings separate from me. It consequently gives a reason for cognitive deepening of a distinction between me and other people.

The heart of Patočka’s philosophy of the body is a conception of the body as the horizon of experience. The body, according to that conception, appears to be not only a guarantor of individualization of experience, but it also protects from submerging into pure subjectivity.

It is recommendable to start describing that vision of corporeality from human autonomy from things and facts. While animals live continuously in direct reference to reality, to the context, to the present – and refer to what directly influences them – a human being, by his attitude, introduces himself into situations which are different than those directly present, into the past, into the future, with all quasi-structures of the future and the past. He comes into the imaginary world – the world of thoughts which exist and which simultaneously do not exist yet. At that time he is active and locally adequate, and must integrate himself here and now. People are characterized by a variety of possibilities, freedom from the present, from direct data.

The human being, by virtue of his corporeality, is placed between the two poles of experience – the objective one and the subjective one – and corporeality, in Patočka’s philosophy, is a bridge between the subjective and the objective.

That coming from the subjective into the objective – and back – is a process which can be perceived as connected with development of the individual sense of identity and internalization of social categories. At the beginning the cogniz-

ing subject explains and elucidates that what it perceives by making use of the horizon which was created by others. Modifying and enriching of other people's horizon with his own experience and understanding takes place only as the second step.

Patočka introduces the notion of "horizon", which describes something what embraces all detailed data and transcends it. The horizon points out to limits of going beyond, to transcendence of what is present in me. The horizon is metaphorically explained by Patočka as the final limit of the landscape. It is neither individualized, nor placed in experience and perception, but everything is defined by its relation to it. It allows to place experiences and things, among other experiences and things, and to provide them with meaning. It allows to make some perceived fragments parts of reality into a whole. Patočka writes: "If the centre moves, the perspective changes, objects change from peripheries to the centre, but the horizon remains unchanged"<sup>3</sup>.

The world often is defined as the horizon of horizons, the horizon of the whole reality, where a partial, local horizon has its place, where everything has its place. The quintessence of the construct of "horizon" in Patočka's works seems to be constituted by the fact that it is externally superimposed, it is some understanding of things and ourselves we place ourselves in. Development of self-understanding and understanding things goes in two directions. The first – the primary one – is giving meaning to and understanding one's own experience in the context of a superimposed horizon. The second direction – which is much more valuable for an individual – is creation of a renewed horizon, violation of that way of understanding things which has been given by Others. Patočka writes:

[...] We continuously live in a relation experienced by others in the world as something actually given [...]. Things beyond our senses are present for us. Even if we never cognize them in the original form, that way experiences of others become actual for us<sup>4</sup>.

Patočka writes about looking at oneself without a third party's glasses, without impersonal reflection – thus, an experience becomes my experience when I refer it to myself, to its meaning for me, to meaning in my life. In the process of providing an experience with a personal dimension the first not only gets a new meaning, but also – what is the most important process – "I" reveals itself and it develops, it is not subordinated to the process of revelation of the "objective" meaning given by "you" and third parties. "Summing up, we, on the one hand, are a stream of that centrifugal energy and, on the other hand, we are simultaneously what gets to know itself and finds itself in that stream as its axis"<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> J. Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, Open Court Publishing Company, Illinois 1998, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

In that process of self-revelation the fundamental role is played by human corporeality. Patočka understands it as an axis uniting our understanding of the world. Primarily that axis is present unconsciously, it acts automatically through our senses in order to recognize a meaning and a horizon described by others. But when it starts to appear among those alien meanings as “my experience”, “my perception”, it begins to unite somehow anew not only the external world but also the human internal world. Patočka describes that mechanism as focusing on a thing while omitting one’s own experience. The identity given things by others cause that we ignore ourselves. That ignorance does not consist in oblivion, it should be emphasized that it rather manifests itself by not giving any significance, omitting ourselves and our experiences while analyzing and giving names to our perceptions.

The human body is difficult to be perceived and given meanings because it is passive dynamism of our perception. We are self-aware as something that is here, but what, unlike other things in the world, is not a phenomenon but represents other things for us – causes that those things come into our view. Corporeality – being an unconscious foundation of perception, is a material reflection of the one who observes – “I”. On the other hand, “I” acts, but it never comes into our sight like every other object<sup>6</sup>.

In Patočka’s philosophy we find a personal conception of the human body, which stops to be a thing among other things. And although the body can be perceived as a thing – as it takes place in medical sciences – a human being does not live like other things, he outreaches them, directs his senses at reality, is active. The human body, its activity, are not only present among them, but they also influence them. Corporeality builds a sensual field, which becomes a system the things are in. It can be exemplified by the conception of space with its division into directions: right, left, front, back – they are an expression of the primary symmetry of the body. That dynamism manifests itself as orientation among things. Human corporeality in Patočka’s philosophy constitutes a system which transcends itself onto the whole reality. In its first stage, it is an unconscious mechanism, but in the next one it can become conscious, provided that “I” experiences its corporeality and does not perceive it as an objective thing described as an object, an organism, matter.

Another dimension of corporeality as a function of the horizon is experiencing pain, pleasure, fatigue, vigor. It points out that we are the starting point for activity – I am a thing among other things, but I am directed by my own specific intentions. This is the reason, the source of what we intend to do, what we keep, that all is based on those feelings. Pain and pleasure fill something in our bodies, but they do not manifest themselves to us as other things. Pain is not in front of us as a thing, it does not reveal itself in common space. Pain and joy are much

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 40–41.

more focused on our dynamism in particular situations of our bodily existence. But it is not a simple bodily situation – it takes into account the context the body belongs to and it manifests itself by something what we call mood. That mood – as it is emphasized by Patočka – either opens us to reality, or it closes us. The fact we work either energetically, or with a headache influences our involvement in the task, various moods influence our activity<sup>7</sup>.

Another issue which is dealt with by Patočka in the context of the body – and is somehow returned by him to philosophy – are bodily dispositions which are unconsciously assumed by us and used in practical life. It can be exemplified by playing an instrument, learning to drive or sports training. We assume that our bodies can achieve mastery in making movements, in spite of the fact that nothing suggests it in a given moment. The fact that the body is naturally at our disposal in that field is used in many other contexts – for example in sports or physiotherapeutic activity. Those bodily dispositions assume autonomy of corporeality – not in the sense of its submission to unavoidable laws of evolution or nature, but as autonomy of learning – development of muscle memory and movement habits – which is used in the course of sports training, playing an instrument or physiotherapy.

Another characteristic feature of the human body, which plays an important role in the process of cognition, is movement. Movement always is manipulation of things and is defined by their meaning, which is an aim, a direction, their “where from” and “where to”. A step, coming to some points, a sequence of movements – they reveal uniting nature of movement. There are always “where from” and “where to”. Movement is individual – such as the body in space is individual. Patočka emphasizes that Aristotle’s conception of movement was based on its subjective experience, on movement of the body – not on a mechanical conception. The living body is at our disposal, it answers our impulses. That dynamism never presents itself as an objective thing. We do not learn movement and coordination by analyzing and objectifying it. We need only an object to focus on and the whole mechanism of our body goes towards it – what means that it enables “I” to jump outside himself. That mechanism takes place – like in the case of learning to play an instrument – first consciously and then it becomes automatized. It shapes our relations with things and adjusts our dynamism to them.

The personal character of the body is also showed by Patočka in the phenomenon of subjective movement, which is described by him as living efficiency. Movement is realization of something what does not exist yet. Each activity has its aim to make things such as we wish them to be. What we try to do is to broaden our reality, that is why it may appear to us as a possibility among other possibilities. Movement fulfills intentions when it is realized, it is a manifestation of our trust in the world, in things; it is, however, subordinated to the bodily rhythm, which makes it real<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. J. Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World...*, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

Patočka stresses that “I” – as a force looking for a passage to objective realization of relations in the world – finds that passage thanks to the body and in the form of movement. “I” – and nothing else – determines the form of movement. “I” makes decisions whether it will develop its abilities in movement, or it will shrink to almost automatic repetition or an organic rhythm. Movement becomes the way “I” expresses itself, its answer to the world – an answer whose character and richness manifest itself, for example, in sport, dance, ballet – or “I” can stop at a so-called “organic rhythm”.

Corporeality appears to the subject as a force, a dynamism which makes for things, objectivity. An important aspect of corporeality, which is described by Patočka and used in therapy, is the main moment of emotional localization in the form of a disposition which is found by “I” in itself. Corporeality is the basis for the subject’s activity – as in the case of the spatial perspective we locate ourselves in and – thanks to abilities of our corporeality (right, left) – we become oriented. Movement toward things has a feature of something what is, but what does not fully manifest itself, what is primary – corporeality. Merleau-Ponty speaks about a magic relation between the internal consciousness of movement and obedient corporeality<sup>9</sup>.

That mechanism reveals itself as a horizon. That distinguishes the phenomenological way of thinking. The horizon manifests its presence, but, besides it, it only points out to that what is not given and what is supposed. Patočka refers to Merleau-Ponty and his metaphor of a cinema, which is dark inside and – thanks to that – we see a film. The way that dynamism manifests itself is revealed in things.

Patočka remarks that contemporary philosophers emphasize that other beings and other “I”-s (that is, you, he, she) play an important role as the basis for our experience which makes us objective to ourselves. Patočka himself does not attribute much significance to others in the process of self-objectification. He is of an opinion that, in some sense, I am a thing, an object for myself – even if I abstract myself from relations with others. I feel myself in some sense, I see myself (I see a part of my body). The phenomenon of myself as something objective is, however, only a part – the human being should not stop at it in his self-understanding, as we do in the case of things and other “I”-s. According to Patočka, “I” is a situational concept – and that means that simultaneously “I” is created and perceives objective moments of itself, without stopping to perceive itself subjectively. Sartre maintains that “I” in relation with the other becomes fully an object, because I live continuously in a personal situation – for I continue to see others who remember me, and I see in them my reflected image like in a mirror. For Patočka it is possible to say: “I am myself, taking into account you”<sup>10</sup>.

Patočka introduces into philosophy a conception of the body as a foundation of the experience of “I”, which we cannot share with another person. I am alone

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

in experiencing through my body and that is a world others cannot directly participate in. That is why “I” perceives other “I”-s abstractly – and, on the basis of my own experience, I know that they are also authentic, that they find themselves in the same situation of absolutely experienceable “I”. We can also come to a conclusion about some dependence – which is silently assumed, but not called, by Patočka and which is very significant in the context of human relations taking place, for example, in education. That dependence consists in proportionality between self-awareness of my own “I” and awareness of another person’s experience. The more shallow is my awareness of my “I”, the more superficial is understanding of another “I”.

Phenomenology of corporeality is phenomenology of our concreteness, which – in Patočka’s philosophy – is born from a dialectic relation between “I” and objectivity. That relation is connected with life not in ourselves but in that what we are not, with finding ourselves in that what we are not. Here we obviously have dialectic in concrete, and – what is worth emphasizing – that dialectics does not need to be reciprocal. The human being finds himself in things, but they are condemned to their finitude without awareness.

Patočka, although he takes much from existentialism, clearly stands out of it and stresses differences between his conception – that is, philosophy of concrete incarnation of the human being – and Sartre’s or Heidegger’s philosophy. Existential philosophy treats a human being as a being thrown among others, his relation with the world is negative – the positive solution is to break away from the world by its negation. Patočka distances also himself from German idealism by stressing that Hegel showed that a human being – in order to meet himself – must go through a painful conflict, self-cognition is a result of a battle. Moreover, there is a gap in German idealism, which should be understood as a lack of connection between meaning, sense of experience and thought.

What enables Patočka to integrate those dimensions in philosophy is a conception of the subjective body – the body belonging to “I”, which firstly, together with “I”, discovers things and others while remaining unaware of itself, then differentiates itself from others and comes back to itself in order to recognize itself. That recognition, however, takes place not only in the realm of thought, language analysis, but also in the field of experience, which is undescrivable and which will remain the domain of “I” forever<sup>11</sup>. Patočka tries to show the phenomenon of corporeality, of being a body, which always leads deeper and reveals also the phenomenon of the subjective body as continuation of our personal existence.

The vision of corporeality in Patočka’s philosophy can constitute a theoretical justification for educational currents which show appreciation to emotional, social and relational education of teachers and coaches, because a human being

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 76.



who is aware only of his thoughts and views, and submitted to his emotions which are not understood by him – and insensitive to the body where those emotions manifest themselves – is alien for himself, non-integrated. Moreover, he cannot help others in cognizing and understanding their own emotions<sup>12</sup>.

Thanks to such philosophers as Patočka, the vision of the cognizing subject with cognitive abilities predicted and described by behaviorism, evolutionism or intellectualism becomes enriched and has an alternative. In that diversity an important role is played by human corporeality, which determines the subject of cognition by placing it in space and constitutes the first field signified by notions. Defining corporeality is the main source of changes in the definition of cognitive abilities of the cognizing subject. The body becomes the area of the subject, which integrates it not only with the external world but also internally.

## Bibliography

- Bloom K., *The Embodied Self. Movement and Psychoanalysis*, London: Karnac 2006.
- Czechowski M., Femiak J., Kuk A., *Kompetencje społeczne i inteligencja emocjonalna nauczycieli wychowania fizycznego: warsztaty dydaktyczne [Physical Education Teachers' Social Competences and Emotional Intelligence. Didactics Workshop]*, Warszawa 2015.
- Czarnocka M., *Podmiot poznania a nauka [The Subject of Cognition and Science]*, Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Warszawa 2003.
- Femiak J., *Cielesność w teorii wychowania fizycznego. Od materializmu do holizmu [Corporeality in the Theory of Physical Education. From Materialism to Holism]*, Wydawnictwo AWF, Warszawa 2012.
- Lakoff G., Johnson M., *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York 1999.
- Patočka J., *Body, Community, Language, World*, Open Court Publishing Company, Illinois 1998.
- Tempczyk M., *Poznanie naukowe a emocje [Scientific Cognition and Emotions]*, [in:] *Wiedza a uczucia [Knowledge and Emotions]*, ed. by A. Motycka, IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2003.

---

<sup>12</sup> M. Czechowski, J. Femiak, A. Kuk, *Kompetencje społeczne i inteligencja emocjonalna nauczycieli wychowania fizycznego: warsztaty dydaktyczne [Physical Education Teachers' Social Competences and Emotional Intelligence. Didactics Workshop]*, Warszawa 2015.