Patočka, Barbaras, and The Movement of Existence


The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1907–77) studied under both Husserl and Heidegger. Due to the political turmoil affecting his native country throughout the twentieth century, Patočka was only able to work as a professor of philosophy for a few intermittent periods of his life. Nonetheless, he wrote extensively on philosophy and conducted informal seminars with students throughout his life. He was forced to retire prematurely from Charles University in Prague as a result of his political convictions in favor of democracy. After later signing the human rights manifesto Charta 77, he died in 1977 of a brain hemorrhage during an intensive, eleven hour interrogation by the Czech police. Although only a few of his texts have been translated into English, his work has garnered renewed attention in Europe, especially due to Jacques Derrida’s sustained engagement with Patočka’s thought in *The Gift of Death*. The year 2007 marked his centenary as well as the thirtieth anniversary of his brutal death and thus several volumes dedicated to the Czech philosopher have been published recently, including *Le mouvement de l’existence* by Renaud Barbaras.

Renaud Barbaras is currently a professor of philosophy at the University of Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne and is widely regarded to be the leading authority on the thought of Merleau-Ponty. This reputation is built on works such as *The Being of the Phenomenon* (1991), *Le tournant de l’expérience: Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty* (1998), and *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception* (1999). This latter work, where Barbaras develops a theory of perception that is equally critical of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, provides the tacit backdrop for the present text. In *Desire and Distance*, Barbaras’ criticism of Husserl’s account of transcendental subjectivity relies heavily on Patočka’s work on the phenomenological concept of the world. On this view, Husserl’s key contribution pertains to the nature of our perception of the world, especially the theory of “adumbrations” (*Abschattungen*). Husserl, however, compromised this basic insight into perception by retaining a Cartesian conceptual framework that distinguishes between transcendent and immanent spheres and that takes the immanent sphere to be given “all at once.” In his criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s account of corporeal subjectivity, Barbaras is also inspired by Patočka, especially in the claim that corporeality as such is not basic but rather its motility, or living movement. As a living...
movement, Barbaras claims, perception is structured as a desire. Since nothing can fully satisfy desire, desire in principle exceeds what is given and attained, thus opening a distance between what is present in intuition and what is intended by desire. While this overview provides only the most rudimentary picture of a very intricate theory of perception developed by Barbaras in *Desire and Distance* and elsewhere, it does identify the central purpose of *Le mouvement de l’existence*, namely, to demonstrate the abundant resources in Patočka’s philosophy for a renewed phenomenology of perception.

The title of the book, *Le mouvement de l’existence*, refers to one of the key concepts developed in Patočka’s later work—*Body, Community, Language, World*—although Barbaras actually does not focus in much detail on Patočka’s own elaboration of this concept. As a whole, the book is comprised of six studies on Patočka. Each one of the studies tends to move straightaway into its own questions, without providing much contextualization or direction for the reader. That should not be taken to imply that the work is fragmented or unorganized—in fact, considering the difficulty of its subject matter, it is remarkably clear—but that the task of contextualization is delegated mostly to the reader. For this reason, readers would be advised first to become familiar with Barbaras’ earlier works and, for those unfamiliar with Patočka’s writings, to consult Erazim Kohak’s useful book, *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*. In what follows, I will provide a brief overview of each one of the studies and then indicate some directions of future inquiry opened by them.

The first study, “The Sense of Experience,” establishes a key distinction between two different types of experience: the experience that we have (*l’expérience que nous avons*) and the experience that we are (*l’expérience que nous faisons*). This latter type of experience, Barbaras shows, is disclosed through Patočka’s conception of Negative Platonism. On this conception, the task of philosophy is to transcend our complacent satisfaction with the everyday world. This is why the fundamental task of philosophy, according to Patočka, is carried out through Husserl’s method of epoché, where our ordinary experience of objects is bracketed, and we are called to reflect on the question of their sense. The true task of the epoché, therefore, is to challenge the experiences that we have in order to open us to the experiences that we are. This task, as Barbaras proceeds to explain, can be carried out on both the object and subject poles of the intentional correlation. On the object side of the intentional correlation, the task of phenomenology is thus to highlight the incompleteness of our perceptual experiences of objects. Beyond the experiences that we have of objects, phenomenology directs us toward what exceeds them, namely, the broader non-intuited world toward which every experience of objects refers. Likewise,