

ΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑ: A Phenomenological Analysis of Philosophical Conversion¹

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“Σκόπει δὴ, ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, αὐτῶν λύσιν τε καὶ ἴασιν τῶν δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης, οἷα τις ἂν εἶη, εἰ φύσει τοιάδε ζυμβαῖνοι αὐτοῖς.”²
(Plato, Republic, 515)

Serious philosophical reflection intends to arrive at some kind of self-evident objective truth, and thereby philosophical reflection aims to give an account of its object in the most faithful manner. In this way philosophy entails self-reflection, a phenomenology of the philosophical thinking itself. The difference between the various philosophical systems, schools, methods and approaches consists rather in *how* they conceive and describe the process of coming from the weaker to the stronger sense of knowledge, or better the way they conceive the process of coming from δόξα (doxa) to ἐπιστήμη (episteme) – the latter meaning a philosophically approved

¹ I am greatly indebted to my friend Dr. Emilio Morales for the inspiring conversations with had on this topic.

² „...watch the process whereby the prisoners are set free from their chains and, along with that, cured of their lack of insight“, in: Martin Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth”, trans. by Thomas Sheehan, in: *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 155.

truth as the final destination of the intellectual journey between these two poles. This motion of the spirit in its existential realization is philosophy itself.

It is noteworthy that the essential aspect of such *transition* that reveals and characterizes how one arrives at some objective and evident truth is *conversion*. I am going to argue with Plato and in this respect probably with his best contemporary interpreter of Plato, Patočka, that the essential step that defines the nature of philosophy enabling us to enter the realm of truth, is precisely conversion, i.e. *μετάνοια*.

THE TRANSITION FROM ΔΟΞΑ TO ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΗ HAPPENS THROUGH CONVERSION

Within the platonic tradition, the way of discovering and unfolding philosophical truth entails the fundamental step of *μετάνοια*. This way of conversion, as prerequisite for any philosophical knowledge, is defined by Plato as a *periagoge oles tes psyches*, i.e. a complete turning around of the soul. In what is traditionally called the ‘Allegory of the Cave’ (*Republic*, VII, 514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7), Plato describes the encounter of the philosopher with the Idea of the Good. It is well known how Plato stresses that there is no elevation of the soul possible without a former act of conversion, i.e. turning away from the appearances to something that is beyond them and originates them. Instead of offering an accurate interpretation of *μετάνοια* within the *corpus platonicum*, which has already been done by Patočka and Heidegger,³ I will contribute to the *phenomenological investigation* of the Czech Socrates on the nature of philosophical conversion.

³ Jan Patočka: *Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1991; and Martin Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth”, trans. by Thomas Sheehan, in: *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 155-182.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHICAL CONVERSION?

In order to characterize *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), one has to ask at least three basic questions. The first concerns the starting point of conversion (from whence?), the second describes the destination (where to?) and the third illuminates the specific mode of occurrence.

*Some fundamental aspects of 'natural attitude'*⁴

The 'from whence' of the conversion can be designated by the Husserlian expression: *natural attitude*⁵. It is appropriate to name it thus, for we naturally have this attitude without any special intellectual or spiritual effort. The natural attitude as a basic disposition characterizes our everyday awareness of the world around us such as our preoccupation with ourselves and others. It transmits the reality we commonly refer to when speaking or acting in the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), it is what we presume to be 'there' for us and we presume it will function as such. Husserl is certainly right in this sense to specify it as *pre-scientific* and *pre-philosophical* attitude. It does not exclude, however, either scientific interest or philosophical openness but rather paves the way for a deeper and more accurate questioning, thus transmitting the most basic features of reality.

Further, it is appropriate to talk about an *attitude* here, for this 'natural attitude' is neither an act nor a characteristic of the object or subject.⁶ It is a type

⁴ I intend here to develop further some of Patočka's ideas explained in Jan Patočka: *Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991) and Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Petr Lom, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) and Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1996).

⁵ Husserl explains this notion in his work *Ideas* (1913), and developed it later up to his last work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936/54) where it became a key concept for his complex idea of 'life-world'.

⁶ Pfänder gives the following essential characteristics of any 'Gesinnung' (attitude): First of all, a 'Gesinnung' is wedged in between the subject and the object. It is a property of neither the subject nor the object, but rather is that which bridges the psychic distance between the two

of openness, an inner disposition towards reality that enables the subject to see the object as it reveals itself. But the natural attitude as such is undetermined to the extent that it depends on (i) the nature of the object and (ii) the characteristics of the subject according to which the subject and object spontaneously relate in the moment of encounter. The natural attitude is thus not unconscious, though it is certainly spontaneous and unreflexive, i.e. it does not appear *thematically* as such for the consciousness but rather is the background for every thematic appearance of the phenomenon.

The natural attitude can be best characterized with respect to temporality. The conscious flux as the natural experience of time passing is constitutive of the meaning of anything, that is, it is the original givenness of consciousness. Whatever we perceive through the natural attitude becomes meaningful on a horizon formed by complex and spontaneous *expectations based on past experiences*. These expectations build a complex network of correlated meaning-unities (*Sinnzusammenhang*).

It is important to see, however, that –although not to the same extent– the meaning of each and every phenomenon transcends this pre-given natural horizon both by existence and by being-in-this-way. Especially if something is perceived in the way that Plato calls θαυμάζειν (wondering) –an act considered the origin of philosophy– it reveals itself on its own and thus calls for a break through to this preliminary and transient ‘natural meaning-horizon’: with its radiant *presence* it compels us to think. Its superabundant meaning refers beyond itself and thus opens up a horizon of interpretation.

Whatever comes to be considered *in itself*, not only as mere *datum* but also as meaningful *donum*⁷ – in its reality as *gift* – opens a window on a distinct and

poles. This does not mean that I cannot properly be said to be ‘benevolent towards the other person’; it means rather that this benevolence is by no means my own creation, a mere idea, phantasm, or product of my mind that is independent of the reality and nature of the object to which the ‘Gesinnung’ refers. This objective character of the ‘Gesinnung’ is of essential importance for comprehending the appeal of the other person to be affirmed in herself and for her own sake. See in: Alexander Pfänder: *Zur Psychologie der Gesinnungen*, Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung, Vol. III. Niemeyer, Halle 1916; see also: Mariano Crespo: „Esbozo de una fenomenología de las disposiciones de ánimo”, in: *Dialogo Filosófico*, no. 68, (Mayo/Agosto 2007).

⁷ There is a remarkable connection between the distinction made between *datum* (mere givenness, self-revelation of the thing in its manifold appearances) and *donum* (the thing in its

more fundamental correlation of meaning-unities (*Sinnzusammenhang*), of a deeper subsistent reality than we previously perceived through the natural attitude.

THE 'BREAK THROUGH'

The natural attitude versus philosophical attitude

Let us first consider then the question of *how the realm of the natural attitude in general relates to the realm of the philosophical attitude!* There are two basic alternatives that here deserve attention: *fundamental separation* or *fundamental unity*. In opposition to what I consider the tragic failure of mainstream (post)modern philosophy that clearly opts for an increasing separation, I am going to argue for the basic unity of the philosophical and natural realm⁸.

First of all, it is undoubtedly the same person who acts in the world within the natural attitude, and who experiences the change of attitude (partially undergoing it and partially executing it) in order to dwell within the realm of philosophical truth, immersed in contemplation. The organic unity between, on the one hand, the philosopher as member of the *polis*, and, on the other, the thinker or theoretician, has always been considered the criterion for the authenticity of philosophical claims.

Secondly, metaphysical reflections *in stricto sensu* would come to their end by thinking that the object revealed through the *natural attitude* is ontologically speaking not identical with the object perceived through the philosophical

gift-character, revealing the Giver beyond being) and the Aristotelian distinction in its revised and Christianized form by Saint Thomas between *actus essendi* and *essence*. See: *In I Sent.*, 8, 1, 1, c; 8, 4, 2, ad 2; 8, 5, 2, c; and in: *In III Sent.*, 11, 1, 2, ad 2; and in: *De Veritate*, 1, 1, c; 1,1, ad 1; 1, 1, ad sc 3; 10, 8, ad 13; and in: *Summa Theologiae*, I, 3, 4, ad 2; *De Potentia*, 7, 2, ad 1; *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, 9, 4, 1, c; *In Metaphysicorum*, 4, 2, No. 6; *In De Hebdomadibus*, 2.

⁸ This division between the natural and supernatural (philosophical or theological) is the origin of 'compartmentalisation' or the fragmentation of knowledge that is accepted and affirmed in postmodern times as a natural state within the 'development of spirit' after the 'obvious' failure of any encompassing and overreaching story or system of philosophy proposed by modernity.

attitude. The phenomena always appear revealing (even if in a certain way also hiding) the *noumenon*, the *thing in itself* of which it is an appearance. Whatever clear philosophical insight we might arrive at, it is also valid for the whole realm given through the natural attitude. Moreover, the evidence we obtain by intuition and unfold dialectically is confirmed and verified through experiences within the natural world. If it were otherwise, if our everyday experiences contradicted these philosophical insights, or if it were not only subjectively difficult but also objectively impossible to live a life according to these truths, one would have good reason to doubt whether one could rightly and fully grasp and truthfully interpret what these intuitions really communicated. We have not only to grasp and comprehend philosophically relevant truth; the additional necessary act is well expressed by the German term 'nachvollziehen': truly *retrace* some insight to its origin and *work out* in a reflective manner each step of the way from the original givenness within experience to the ultimate conclusion (on the nature of being and even beyond being) it gave rise to.

The same strong correlation between the *natural* and the *philosophical realm* is manifested from the point of view of the natural world since nothing other than true experience can be the legitimate starting point of philosophical reflection. Even in the case of necessarily essential and highly intelligible phenomena that most of philosophy (and especially metaphysics) is concerned with, it is necessary to have at least one such-being-experience (*Soseins Erfahrung*)⁹ in which the essence in question is given to consciousness. Without such experiences, philosophy deteriorates to groundless speculation in which nothing that really matters is at stake. This complex relationship between the *natural* and *philosophical* realms of reality could be summarized in the following claim: The *natural attitude* is the existential fundament for the *philosophical attitude* for it gives rise to reflection that intends to trace back appearances to their ultimate origin (*ergründen*). Meanwhile, ontologically speaking, the philosophically accessible reality is the very fundament of the realm of 'reality' (*Realität* as opposed to *Wirklichkeit*) that is revealed for the natural attitude.

⁹ See Dietrich von Hildebrand in: *What is Philosophy?* (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1940). 3. Aufl. 1944. 4. Aufl. Athenäum-Verlag, Bonn 1950, and Adolf Reinach "Concerning Phenomenology", translated by Derek Kelly, titled "What Is Phenomenology," appeared in: *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. I, no. 2 (New Series) (Winter 1968): 234-256.

We can draw some preliminary conclusions from these arguments concerning the nature of conversion: The transition **FROM** one realm to the other is in accordance to this inner fundamental unity of appearance (*Erscheinung*) and thing in itself (*Ding an sich*). Conversion, however radical its actual form might be, does not signify any withdrawal or suspension of the natural affirmation concerning the realm of reality (*Realität*) as experienced through the natural attitude. Conversion might rather be characterized as a transition (*Übergang*) that acknowledges at least the partial validity of reality-sphere (*Realität*) as immediate givenness by precisely revealing the 'whole of reality'¹⁰ (*Wirklichkeit*) that is both a fundament and the sustaining background-context (*Sinnzusammenhang*) for every appearance perceived by the natural attitude.

Philosophical conversion is therefore not so much manifested in *turning away* from something but rather in *turning to* the 'whole of reality' (*Wirklichkeit*), to reality as it is fully revealed to us when looked at with the radical openness that characterizes the philosophical attitude.

The temporal structure of the 'break through'

The distinguishing aspect of the experience called 'philosophical conversion' is doubtless its *temporal structure*. Husserl's suggestion is that through a radical *transcendental epoché* we bracket the real existence of phenomena in order to focus on the process by which their meaning is constituted within the conscious realm. This step, which has been sufficiently criticized, should be done at once for there are no intermediate steps necessary to disentangle every hidden meaning of the phenomenon in question. Husserl's aim was to acquire a perspective that allows us to trace back the process of constitution to its point of origin, i.e. to what is originally given. According to the German thinker, by

¹⁰ I use the expression 'the whole of reality' similar to the term 'the whole life'. I do not refer to reality as to the totality of being but rather as what is real in its most intense form. As human being we don't have any experience of the totality of being that is an artificial and very dangerous concept whenever taken for real. But one certainly experiences reality when something overcomes us and surprises us in a way that its meaning is unshakably solide against any attempt of subjective interpretation. These particular experiences (from tragedy to sublime beauty) reveal something significant beyond the actual content, something about the nature of being as such, and thus about 'the whole of reality'.

'prescinding from real existence', one can shift the focus from the 'whatness' (*Washeit*) of the given thing to the question of 'how this phenomenon is given to us'. This step might lead us back to the unconstituted core or essence of the phenomenon: to the *thing in itself*.

It is true that the change of attitude cannot be executed in any other way but in one swoop (*mit einem Schlag*) as Husserl suggests, but not because it is necessary to bracket at once the whole sphere of real existence. The right methodological step is not so much the exclusion of certain aspects (like real existence), but rather the penetration into what is real, i.e. objectively given. By the mere suspension of belief in the real character of things, one might even miss the most important aspect of their meaning. There are phenomena namely in case of which real existence belongs essentially to their nature (such is the case of God for example). *The radical change of attitude should rather be understood as a response to what is revealed by and in the experience of the real nature of the given phenomenon.* Thereby one changes the focus from the actual experience as such (*Erlebnis*) to what is given through it (*Erlebnisbestand*). Hereby one also shifts one's interest in a radical way from considerations of what the given thing means subjectively, to what it is in itself.

Husserl rightly sees that the philosophical attitude implies a certain new beginning within the conscious flow of time. The question here is how the new beginning (break through) occurs in this spontaneous constitution of time that Husserl describes as a complex unity of *retention* and *protention*¹¹. Husserl's argument implies that it is the act of the subject's will that marks the new beginning, when he changes his attitude. His explanation leaves open, however, why someone would all of sudden act like this. There must be a clear and considerable motivation co-present with consciousness that compels this act. It seems to me that such a motivation cannot be anything but the very transcendent encounter of consciousness with a subject-matter that –whenever its original and objective sense is perceived and acknowledged(!) beyond the mere meaning *for* the experiencing self– it originates a process in consciousness. Contrary to Husserl's view it seems that this process leads to a change in

¹¹ See Husserl: *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time [Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins]*, translated by John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1980).

attitude, not so much as a fruit of meaning that is consciously constituted, but rather as a discovery of the intrinsic meaning of the thing in itself as it is revealed beyond all expectation and conscious constitution.

Therefore, we can conclude that the first steps at the origin of philosophy, and thus of phenomenological investigation faithful to the principle of principles,¹² does not consist primarily in a volitional act of the subject who changes his fundamental attitude. For the subject's act is rather a consequence, or better a response to the 'self-revelation' of the phenomenon. It is exactly the unconstituted, i.e. the new and original sense of the phenomenon that is given as insight that prompts a subjective change of attitude, whenever the subject so allows for this transformation. Thus, every real philosophical insight comprises an unexpected future, a promise of a more fundamental meaning that needs to be explored philosophically and fulfilled existentially. Every intuition into objective reality transmits to consciousness a full presence that foreshadows a future that implies an inexhaustible abundance of meaning. The content of intuition appears always as kind of 'pretaste', as a gift in advance rather than the full meaning of what is there to be comprehended. The very givenness is not a mere presence in the sense of something that is now in this specific moment as it is for the sight, valid. The 'full presence' of givenness goes beyond the analytic concept of temporality consisting of an unlimited chain of 'right now'.

The specific intensity of time-consciousness characteristic of every real discovery of transcendent meaning generates thus *new* expectations, while –on the other hand– it also radically corrects future expectations that stem from the past-comprehension of reality. The intuition's incomprehensible abundance of meaning serves at the same time as a new criterion for the evaluation of lived past experiences: it provokes reflection and revision of former experiences appointing to a more profound layer of meaning.

¹² In the § 24 of the *Ideen I* Husserl elaborates the fundamental idea of philosophical investigation and calls it the 'principle of all principles', "...principle of all principles: that every originally presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally (so to speak in its personal „actuality“) offered to us in „intuition“ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there. We see indeed that each <theory> can only again draw its truth itself from ordinary data" (Hua III/1, 51, 1:9).

Volitional act or mere event?

These reflections on the origin of philosophy bring us to the difficulty of delineating *in what respect exactly philosophical conversion is a willed act and in what sense it is an event*. If one considers it –as Husserl has done in my view– as a purely voluntary act, this runs the risk of committing the mistake by implication that I criticized above, for it qualifies the realm of philosophy as something separate from the life-world (*Lebenswelt*). I argued above that the transition does not depend only and exclusively, and not even primarily on human will. There is rather a natural motion of human soul and therefore of the intellect –as Max Scheler¹³ calls it an “upsurge” (*Aufschwung*) by which it elevates from the lower and more superficial aspects of reality (*Realität*) to the higher and more universal aspects of reality (*Wirklichkeit*) in the full sense. It is to underline that by doing so the soul is lead, inspired and motivated by the very revelation of things themselves! The voluntary act of transition therefore is based on and conditioned by the previous recognition of what appears over and beyond the actual horizon of meaning constituted by the subject (transcendental ego).

Thus, what *subjectively and existentially* manifests itself as an ‘experience of break through’ (*Umbruch*) into the new realm of ‘the whole of reality’ (*Wirklichkeit*) when the intellect penetrates into the transcendent dimensions of the intrinsic meaning (*Sinn*) of a given phenomenon, *objectively* speaking is a guided transition (*Überleitung*). Every single step of advancing within the realm of philosophy, thus even the initiating one of changing the fundamental attitude towards reality (*μετάνοια*), has a precondition: the previous revelation or manifestation of some *unconstituted* aspects of reality. These aspects are beyond the horizon of meaning that is provided by natural attitude through which the subject initially approached reality.

¹³ See Max Scheler, „Vom Wesen der Philosophie. Der philosophische Aufschwung und die moralischen Vorbedingungen“. In: „Vom Wesen der Philosophie. Der philosophische Aufschwung und die moralischen Vorbedingungen“ (Bern und München: Franke Verlag, 1968), p. 63-97.

THE REALM OF REALITY TO WHICH PHILOSOPHY TURNS TO

Let us turn now to the question of how to characterize the 'realm of reality' to which one turns in gratitude through philosophical conversion! Even if our description is rather schematic, there is one essential point that needs to be analysed carefully: is it the idea of the Good –as Plato argues– or is rather it the idea of the True that structures the whole of reality and thus should be the cornerstone of wisdom? Before dealing with this fundamental issue, let us underline the fact that to attribute a distinguished role to the idea of the Good does not in any way put into question the transcendental unity of *goodness, truth and beauty*! The acceptance of their unity, however, does not exclude that these transcendental, being nevertheless distinct, have different functions and relevance within the experience of conversion. Probably the most important argument concerning the primordial role of the idea of the Good in philosophical conversion consists precisely in the experience of truth, for whatever one discovers as true it is never morally, emotionally and even spiritually neutral. Whatever is given through experience and has the potential to lead the philosopher to conversion, is given in a concrete life-world context in which the philosopher's natural preoccupation concerns some kind of good. All philosophical thinking starts as reflection; reflection is going back to some kind of concrete experience of consciousness that has to be elaborated, or investigated along the lines of a particular question that needs to be clarified. The philosopher, previous to his philosophical interest, has already had to recognize and affirm in a responsive manner a particular value appearing to him¹⁴. His philosophical investigation is always already motivated by the concrete

¹⁴ See especially the brilliant interpretation of Saint Thomas' idea on how one gets affected through grasping the *ratio boni* in Rafael Tomas Caldera, *La primera captación intelectual*, IDEA, Caracas 1988, pp. 68-73. Perhaps the most relevant text here is II *Contra Gentiles* 55: „Utroque autem modo inest rebus naturale desiderium essendi: cuius signum est quia et ea quae cognitione carent, resistunt corruptentibus secundum virtutem suorum principiorum naturalium; et ea quae cognitionem habent, resistunt eisdem secundum modum suae cognitionis”. Thus one desire things and persons that are distinct from us as well as one desires one's own existence and integrity as it is manifested in the fact that everything gets opposed to its corruption.

manifestation of a value that he recognized as an objective and immediate call that requires a response (*Wertantwort*¹⁵).

Philosophical reflection at its culmination, i.e. when it considers reality as such, is confronted with the idea of the Good (*Summum bonum*¹⁶) rather than with mere particular goods thematically present for consciousness. Philosophical conversion as such thus manifests itself precisely in turning to the idea of Good revealed through and by particular concepts of goods as they appear on the meaning-horizon that is determined by both the subject and the existential situation this subject is involved in. Indeed, all concepts of value (good) open a window and give access by their concrete manifestation to their own common source, to their real origin that is the Good itself. The philosopher's task consists therefore in deepening experience in reflective and systematic manner in order to find a way (*μέθοδος*) that reveals and makes it possible to grasp what exactly one can regard as the origin of the good or goods that are thematized within the given experience.

Moreover, the philosopher is not only called upon to unfold philosophical insights but also to fully realize them in every dimension of life. Existentially speaking, every particular recognition of the idea of the Good means the appearance of the new criterion of truth in the sense of accepting a *new principle of action*. Therefore, philosophical conversion is not a singular event that is isolated for its outstanding character, but on the contrary, it is the originary experience that allows us to look at the infinite exuberance of reality with a (also conceptually) radically refined vision, for it is concerned with the fundamentals of everything that is.

There are three dimensions of reality that one can distinguish as they are deployed as the consequence of philosophical conversion. These dimensions are spheres of reality in which philosophical insights concerning the idea of the Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν) are called to be realized. It is important to state that, notwithstanding their difference, they are essentially united with each other. The three dimensions are the following: a) the ontological vision that leads to a systematic and methodologically strict explanation of reality as it truly exists; b)

¹⁵ See especially Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Essence of Love* [Das Wesen der Liebe], trans. John F. Crosby (Big Bend: Augustine Press, 2009).

¹⁶ See especially Saint Augustin, *De natura boni*.

the elaboration of the concrete realization of the insights into the idea of the Good concerning the concrete community in which the philosopher finds himself; c) consequences of the insights concerning what Plato and following him Patočka calls the *care for the soul*.

THE NEW ONTOLOGICAL VISION

The first and most fundamental dimension of philosophical conversion is the articulation of this new relationship to the entire reality that appears when the idea of the Good, source of all goodness and value that is present in reality is acknowledged. In order to be a philosophical 'prise de conscience' there must be at least three distinctive features: it has to be systematic, methodologically rigorous and argumentative. There is a fourth feature that deserves special mention and that has been mentioned before: it has to be centred on the idea of the Good and therefore has to be truthful. But, if it is exclusively centred on what is considered true, it runs the risk of becoming a rigid system of truth-claims describing a static vision of the world. Patočka mentions the example of Democritus as opposed to Plato¹⁷, but one could think, among others, of the Hegelian system in opposition to which Kierkegaard developed his criticism. Giving primacy to the 'idea of the True' and leaving thereby aside the 'idea of the Good', is especially tempting for every philosophy that conceives itself as fruit of the *autonomous* human intellect. This leads namely either to a lifeless system of truth-claims that consider themselves complete and closed or –in a no less problematic way– it leads to an open system that is continuously progressing towards a more encompassing knowledge of the world. In contrast, the preoccupation of real wisdom guided by the idea of the Good culminates in a vision that focuses on the 'genealogy of truth', tracing it back to the original givenness of the phenomenon in question. Whenever there is a recognized manifestation of original givenness it leads to some kind of a conversion and thus

¹⁷ Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Petr Lom (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

marks a new beginning of all-encompassing knowledge directed to the principles of being, i.e. wisdom. This is the profound meaning of a *philosophia perennis*¹⁸.

The pertinent question within this approach to wisdom is not exclusively ‘what is true?’, but rather ‘how does truth get revealed, how does it occur and come to the fore *by the affirmation of the good* that is appealingly revealing itself? The special type of philosophy that the encounter with the ‘idea of the Good’ originates, is naturally more concerned in this sense with the very *φαίνεσθαι* (*phainesthai*) than about the *phainomenon*; it is thus more centred on *Werden* (becoming) than on *Sein* (being). It implies namely a whole process of ‘transfiguration’ of the perceived ‘reality’ (*Realität*) when considered in relation to the idea of the Good. Plato’s metaphor of the Sun that illumines everything that is is very telling in this respect. Instead of being concentrated on the mere conceptual structure of the phenomenon, the consideration that includes its essential and original relation to the idea of the Good (*Wesenheit*, essentiality) allows the philosopher to unfold of how actually the revelation (*phainesthai*) of the phenomenon transforms his relation to his community (point *b*) and his own soul (point *c*). Let us turn then to these two dimensions!

THE REVIVAL OF THE RELATION TO THE *POLIS*

Contemporary philosophy seems to have two unquestioned presuppositions that are related to one another. One concerns the nature of philosophical knowledge, the other the mode of its acquisition. The reduced concept of wisdom as a mere outstanding knowledge of some specific fields of culture implies that the process of becoming a philosopher is fundamentally a lonesome business and a mere intellectual endeavour; if there is any need of community in becoming a ‘philosopher’ (i.e. a specialist in some area of university-philosophy) it serves merely as an intellectually stimulating environment.

¹⁸ See on this term especially: Hans Urs von Balthasar: *Von den Aufgaben der katholischen Philosophie in der Zeit* (Freiburg i. Brsg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1998) and Balduin Schwarz: *Ewige Philosophie. Gesetz und Freiheit in der Geistesgeschichte*, introduced by Josef Seifert (Siegburg: Schmitt Verlag, 2000).

For Plato and following his footsteps for classical philosophy in general, very much on the contrary to this, real wisdom only comes to be unfolded within the loving community of likeminded friends. According to Plato's view that is most clearly expressed in *The Seventh Letter*¹⁹, it is precisely the shared and virtuous, i.e. the examined life that prompts, inspires and enables the members of the community to philosophical reflection. What Plato means by philosophical reflection in this context is directed to examine and to investigate the *ultimate principles* according to which a good life, i.e. a life that aspires to divine perfection, is possible.

Without the loving community of friends who share life, there is no wisdom possible for at least two fundamental reasons. The objective example of our friends' virtues allows for a special insight into the principles of their acting for one knows not only how they act but also what their motives are and what, or it is better to say, *who* is the ultimate reference of their action. And secondly, it is the dimension of friendship as concrete love-relationship in which not only the philosophical methods but also what they are based on, the *fundamental attitude* proper to philosophical investigation must be acquired.

Whenever the philosopher has the adequate *fundamental attitude* towards the idea of the Good, and has an objective intuition into unconstituted (objective) truth, he recognizes at the same time that it is valid for the whole community. Moreover, he becomes naturally aware of the fact that this truth and the good that its affirmation entails, have to be realized by the whole community in order to reach their plenitude. In this respect each truth that is recognized as such has its moral relevance for every action that is carried out within the community. While respecting the freedom of the human person it is proper to the philosopher to desire that the relevant acts of the community should be in accordance with the respective truth that the philosopher sheds light on, at least inasmuch as it reveals the ontological status and nature of the things in question. Any particular truth that reaches philosophical comprehension when it is seen in

¹⁹ "I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instructions in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining" (Seventh Letter 341 c).

relation to idea of the Good, and especially the truth concerning the very idea of the Good is of such relevance that it requires the response of the community. This response implies, in the same way, the *transformation of the community* as it reveals reality (*Wirklichkeit*) beyond what is generally recognized as the commune world, or as Husserl calls it, the inter-subjectively constituted life-world (*Lebenswelt*) in relation to which (in the sense of common good) community-life is established. The truth concerning the idea of the Good, whenever philosophically deciphered, indicates a teleology with respect to its realization, i.e. it implies different steps for how the given community can come closer to the full awareness of what has been both theoretically grasped and practically carried out by some members of the community. In this sense the real lovers of wisdom are (whenever their voice is heard), even if eventually deprived of all power, effectively the real leaders of the community.

Personal testimony is in this respect an essential element of every philosophy that is carried out under the guidance of the idea of the Good. For a community to flourish the mere intellectual contribution, a mere description of truth (however great merits it might have), is radically insufficient without concrete examples of realizing the True as a form of life ordered and lived according to the Supreme Good.

RADICAL CHANGES CONCERNING THE 'CARE FOR THE SOUL'²⁰

The third and most fundamental dimension in which the influence of the idea of the Good becomes pertinent is the *care for the soul*, for obviously the encounter with the idea of the Good alters the relationship of the subject to its own self. In other words, there is a sudden difference within the personal identity that is caused by the experience of the idea of the Good. The person who experiences the presence of the idea of the Good in its manifestations naturally conceives his

²⁰ The notion of 'care for the soul' has been explored and further developed by Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault. See especially: Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*, Vol. III, translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon, New York, 1986; Foucault: Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the self*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988; and Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1987)

own self in relation to and in the light of the supreme meaning of the idea of the Good. By doing so, however, the subject of experience becomes aware of both his likeness and difference, i.e. what is really, objectively good in his own soul and what is despicable in it. Thus, the revision of consciousness is the most natural consequence of this encounter.

Revision of consciousness does not only mean a scrupulous moral investigation of past actions and attitudes. It concerns primarily an adjustment of the content of past experiences to the outstanding meaning that is transmitted by the encounter with the idea of the Good. There are aspects of the infinite content of memory that concerning some relevant experiences on which the personal identity is based on possibly have been overseen or even repressed and that through their relation to the idea of the Good regain new meaning in the light of the new and transforming experience. Meanwhile, the past is undergoing a fundamental change in the sense of the reorientation of the soul, and thus it becomes a new basis for the personal identity which is based upon it (*Gewesenheit*).²¹ The subject that considers himself in a strong existential relation to the idea of the Good, also projects himself naturally towards a new vision of the future. There is therefore a second natural type of revision of consciousness with respect to *desires, wishes and appetites*; all that should be regulated and adjusted to the manifold and yet one basic criteria that is given by the recognition of the reality of the 'Summum bonum' in different spheres of life.

Only a person who comes to clarity concerning both his past experiences and future desires in relation to 'the whole of reality' that is given through and in the idea of the Good, can really live a fully personal life, which is a life in communion. Only such an integrated person, whose desires –however different they are– are not dispersed but point to the Highest Good, and whose perception of reality is also not inhibited by its past experiences, can be fully himself in the present, *hic at nunc*.

²¹ See Martin Heidegger's lectures from 1929/30: „Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit“ in: Heidegger Gesamtausgabe (GA). Frankfurt a. M., Klostermann and further Martin Heidegger: Des hl. Augustinus Betrachtung über die Zeit. Confessiones lib. XI.; Based on these former lectures in his main work, *Being and Time* Heidegger describes the three temporal extasis like follows: Schon-sein-in-der-Welt: Gewesenheit (past); Sein-bei (dem momentan zu Besorgendem): Gegenwart (present); Sich-vorweg-sein (im Entwurf): Zukunft (future).

The praxis of this *double recollection* forms an essential element of the ‘care for the soul’ and implies a fundamental inner change concerning all the faculties of the soul (emotions and attitudes, will, memory, intellect and imagination). In all these dimensions of the soul the idea of the Good becomes the absolute measure, and thus the main criterion and most integrative factor, for the Highest Good and its manifold manifestations are the main source of happiness which all these faculties in their own way strive for. Therefore, the Highest Good and its evident manifestations are at the same time the main object and the main criteria for morally relevant decisions. For the idea of the Good by its specific givenness (evidence) is the criterion for every truth, thus – as stated above– it gives rise to an integrative process of the memory along which there appear ‘new’ contents and new connections among the meaning-units. As fruit of this reorientation of the soul, there will be a new fundamental attitude, i.e. a new general disposition towards reality.

Given that this *fundamental disposition* is neither a firm characteristics of the person nor a feature of the phenomenon it concerns, but exists rather ‘in between’ these two poles, has to be reaffirmed, readjusted or reiterated whenever either the subject tends to deny some aspects of reality or new features of reality are revealed and captured. Any loss of these traits implies some kind of ‘corruption’ concerning the person for they should be implemented in what the subject considers as objective givenness in relation to which he defines himself. Only the ‘whole of reality’ that includes the implication of the goodness of every being as related to the Highest Good is the right ‘object’ of the appropriate ‘fundamental attitude’.

This ‘fundamental attitude’ that is instigated by the revelation of Highest Good as transmitted through the phenomena present in different realms of life becomes only effective and strong if *exercised* throughout life. The idea of the Good is namely very ephemeral if not pinned down in all practical aspects of life. In his historical analysis of philosophy as a *way of life* Pierre Hadot pointed out very clearly how philosophy deteriorated to a mere theoretical science. He rightly stressed the significance for every life directed to wisdom the spiritual exercises. Philosophical conversion is, however, still unfinished and inauthentic if not supplemented and reaffirmed by what Foucault calls ‘technologies of the

self.²² The converted person, i.e. the true lover of wisdom does not only *think* differently about being, the *polis* and his own self but also *lives* and *acts* in a radically proficient and masterful way for he is moved by true and *practical* love towards the *Summum bonum* as present in the life-world. Theory and contemplation, however the highest and 'purest' way of experiencing the 'Highest Good', must entail a form of praxis to live a philosophical life.

ELEMENTS FOR A DEFINITION OF 'PHILOSOPHICAL CONVERSION'

The adequate description of philosophical conversion is an essential part of any serious philosophical reflection: wisdom should be able to explain its own source and starting point. The task here is to grasp and to convey the *double character* of conversion. It is at the same time an event that we undergo and a responsive act. Since it marks precisely the encounter of the two fields it is at the same time natural and supernatural, objective and subjective. In a similar manner its implications are both individual and communitarian. Only a careful phenomenological analysis can disentangle these aspects of the specific double character of conversion without reducing them to something proper to conversion which nevertheless does not cover the whole phenomenon or belong to its essence.

This short essay is the first step of an even more pretentious philosophical endeavour that clarifies how philosophical conversion is fully realized only when it leads to religious conversion(s)²³. It is in this respect that I would like to highlight the following essential aspects of conversion: Philosophical conversion starts with changing the fundamental attitude. The 'break through' from the natural life-world to what I have called the 'whole of reality' can be rightly

²² See footnote Nr. 20.

²³ See the second part of this work in "Metanoia and Conversion. Overcoming Barriers of Humanity", in: *Bariery Człowieczeństwa. Wybrane aspekty teoretyczno-metodologiczne* [Barriers of Humanity. Selected Theoretical and Methodological Aspects] ed. by Monika Kardaczynska and Joanna Sosnicka, Kielce: Wyższa Szkoła Umiejętności im. Stanisława Staszica 2011, in print.

characterized as *manu ductus*²⁴, i.e. guided transition. The natural world does not lose its validity when its fundament is revealed.

Conversion as radical openness to reality, by correcting future expectations that stem from a past-comprehension of reality, generates *new* future expectations; it gives rise to a fundamental new desire. The intuition's incomprehensible abundance of meaning serves at the same time as a new criterion for evaluating past experiences: it provokes reflection and revision of former experiences appointing to a more profound layer of meaning. Thus, there is certainly one particular event followed by a series of reflections; this 'event-act' (thanks to which the fundamental attitude is established as a disposition to the idea of the Good) is called conversion. On the other hand, it is necessary that the subject continuously revises and reaffirms his original conversion for, firstly, the fact that humanly speaking this relation is fragile and, secondly, there are more and more dimensions that have to be discovered for which this basic relation is constitutive.

Every philosophical conversion starts with a capturing of the self-revelation of being in its reference to its own source, i.e. to the divine reality beyond being. Thus, philosophical conversion is realized by radical change in relation to the *Summum bonum* as it is present beyond and in being: evidencing now an unconditioned disposition to affirm it. This 'fundamental attitude' opens new horizons in the following spheres of reality that are strongly intertwined: (1) There is a new relationship to the ontological reality, i.e. to 'everything that there is'. (2) Based on this, the converted person naturally revises his bonds of affection with his fellow beings and to the whole community (polis). (3) There is no conversion without a new relationship to one's own self.

These fundamental transformations are manifested in a new and more philosophical way of living, one that cultivates the presence of Wisdom in all spheres of life.

²⁴ I would like to recall here the revision of the illumination theory by Bonaventure which I think is in many respects the most appropriate when explaining conversion. See: *Textus transcriptus ex editione Quaracchi OPERA OMNIA S. BONAVENTURAE* Vol. V., 1891, pp. 295-316 cum notatis et Scholio.