Almost for Nothing: Questioning Sacrifice in Dialogue with Jan Patočka

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the idea of the so-called sacrifice for nothing in Jan Patočka. Firstly, I clarify the concept and explain its place in the context of Patočka’s thought and its surrounding historical conditions. Secondly, I critically apply Patočka’s concept to some particular examples, such as a free-willing sacrifice of a mother for her child and a forced-violent sacrifice of political oppression. Thirdly and finally, I argue that despite the language of nothingness, it is possible to draw a positive program from these reflections, and thus to turn the negativity of sacrifice into a being transforming experience.

Keywords

Jan Patočka – phenomenology of sacrifice – self-sacrifice – kenosis – transformation

1 Introduction

Sacrifice for nothing is one of the most controversial and thought-provoking ideas developed by the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka. The interpreters disagree on whether Patočka’s meditation on sacrifice is a purely intellectual exercise, which accords with his philosophical oeuvre, or whether the context of historical events forced Patočka to invest time and energy into questioning sacrifice. Even more controversial is the question of who stands as Patočka’s sacrificial model: Christ or Socrates? Is it the philosopher who stands...
heroically face to face with his own finitude or the Son of God who, in the words of Charles Péguy, “once feared to die”?

This paper develops the hypothesis that there are two senses of sacrifice in Jan Patočka: (1) the heroic; and (2) the kenotic one. The main sources of Patočka’s theory of sacrifice reside in his later work, for example, in the Varna lectures, the Four Seminars on the Problem of Europe, or the Postscript to *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*. These texts, as many experts agree, point in the direction of the negative and highly enigmatic sacrifice for nothing. Unfortunately, the early writings of Patočka seem a bit overlooked in this respect. True, Patočka does not tackle the issue as explicitly then as he does towards the end of his professional life. It is also true that the dramatic and in a certain sense tragic conclusion of Patočka’s life pushes the interpreters to ponder on the philosopher’s own self-sacrifice – the act which mirrors the textual evidence of his later writings. A closer look, however, provides a more complex picture. The earlier writings suggest a more positive, even radically positive, that is, heroic stance towards sacrifice which precedes the kenotic one. I will argue that these two senses of sacrifice do not equal the two different concepts of sacrifice in Patočka; it is as if the author developed the idea gradually and switched from one concept to another. In fact, I am convinced that asking the question in binary terms is flawed and creates a false dichotomy. The first aim of this paper is therefore to show that Patočka developed a complex understanding of sacrifice that is not purely negative and self-destructive, but contains a positive (intellectual) program.

First, I will present the core of Patočka’s concept of sacrifice – the so-called “sacrifice for nothing” – and will argue that Patočka’s point is more existential than phenomenological. Secondly, I will introduce two particular examples of sacrifice: (a) the self-sacrifice of Jan Palach; and (b) the sacrifice reminiscent of Jesus of Nazareth (even though his name is not explicitly mentioned by Patočka). My point is to (i) illustrate the seductive negativity of sacrifice in Patočka; and (ii) complement this understanding with a more positive implication of Patočka’s concept of the sacrifice for nothing. To do so, I will introduce one more instance: the sacrifice of mother for her child and will argue that this motherly sacrifice is a unique integration of the kenotic and heroic aspect of sacrifice – an authentic sacrifice *par excellence*.

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1 Among the numerous accounts of Patočka’s concept of sacrifice, see, for example: Dodd, *Patočka and the Metaphysics of Sacrifice*; Tai, *An Intercultural Reading of Patočka’s concept of Sacrifice*; and Koci, *Sacrifice and the Self*. I have summarized and interpreted the previous debate on sacrifice and Patočka in my *Sacrifice for Nothing*.
A Phenomenology of Sacrifice for Nothing

In the later writings of Patočka, the theme of sacrifice appears in the context of Patočka's critical engagement with the techno-scientific culture of late modernity. And the relationship between the two is enigmatic. Listen to Patočka's own words:

The experience of sacrifice, however, is now one of the most powerful experiences of our epoch, so powerful and definitive that humankind for the most part has not managed to come to terms with it and flees from it precisely into a technical understanding of being that promises to exclude this experience and for which there exists nothing like a sacrifice, only the utilization of resources.²

The ills of modern objectivism, scientific positivism, and the march toward eternal progress materialises itself in an inability to cope with sacrifice. Patočka warns us that in spite of the increase of a sacrificial vocabulary in late modernity (e.g., as a part of the world-wide warfare and its narrative-logic of sacrifice for homeland and future peace; or, as a part of the sacrifice required for the revolutionary progress and materialization of the iron laws of history), the modern era paradoxically does not know sacrifice. This is the meaning Patočka assigns to Gestell, the Heideggerian term that diagnoses a modernity in which there are no longer individuals but only resources to be constantly used and ordered like objects among objects. This is at the center of Patočka's Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, which Paul Ricouer diagnosed as "frankly shocking," especially because the predominance of war in his interpretation of the 20th century – the war and revolutions as the logical outcome of Gestell which leads the multitudes to a hell-fire. However, as Patočka remarks, in this respect there is nothing like sacrifice, only a utilization of resources.

Patočka provides us with an elegant solution: the response to "there is nothing like sacrifice" is "sacrifice for nothing."³ The notion of nothing, similarly to Gestell, is taken from Heidegger who writes: "Da-sein means: being held out into the nothing."⁴ Making this link between the Heideggerian analytics of Dasein and Patočka's conception of sacrifice more explicit would mean that the sacrifice for nothing is a kind of ontological category and not merely a type of sacrifice. For Patočka, who applies a phenomenological philosophy rather

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² Patočka, Dangers, p. 20.
³ Patočka, Dangers, p. 22.
⁴ Heidegger, What is Metaphysics, p. 91.
than a pure phenomenological description, sacrifice concerns the individual’s existence and this concern culminates in the confrontation with nothing. Sacrifice is the direct, concrete and real experience of nothing. This is analogous to Heidegger’s concept of anxiety, which opens the unsettling experience that there might be nothing to hold onto; however, without this exposure to the nothing and without the manifestation of the nothing, there would be no selfhood, no freedom; the nothing of sacrifice is not in any way external but rather the internal conflict within the human being.

Sacrifice is the ultimate moment of recognition that there is nothing to hold on to. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this recognition is not necessarily epistemic, that is, it does not necessarily happen on the level of intentionality. Patočka confronts us with the ontological-existential meaning of sacrifice.

Sacrifice of the sacrificed loses its relative significance [...] rather, it is significant solely in itself [...] It is the understanding that here something has already been achieved [...] something that is not the means to anything else [...] but rather something above and beyond which there can be nothing.5

What is the exact meaning of this sacrifice for nothing? Patočka notes that the original context of sacrifice is myth and religion. There, sacrifice is any act of intentional deprivation that strengthens a relationship to something or someone superior: the divine. The logic behind the religious sacrificial act is the economy of exchange: something is renounced for something to be attained. In other words, what we have is given up in order to increase what we can materially or spiritually possess.

The same economic pattern is discernible in modernity, argues Patočka. Modernity develops a fascination with sacrifice, but one that is profoundly ambiguous: “our epoch”, as Patočka calls modernity, sacrifices myriads of people for some cause (something) and this act is done with “cold calculation”; two world wars and totalitarian regimes but also “softer” narratives of progress and freedom are the most striking examples of this modern readiness to sacrifice. In this sense, sacrifice seems to be something perfectly in line with the ordered state of techno-scientific society (Gestell). And this is a peculiar thing: Many victims sacrificed for something understand their victimization in terms of a sacrificial act. To understand the ambiguity, we must pay attention to the language of sacrifice. In contrast to English which differentiates between sacrifice and victim, the Czech expression for sacrifice (oběť), as with the German

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5 Patočka, Heretical Essays, p. 130.
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Opfer, bears the double meaning of sacrifice and victim. Regarding this topic, Patočka raises a crucial question:

Can we, however, understand this great upheaval which, historically, manifests itself in the readiness of ever so many to sacrifice themselves for the sake of a different, better world simply in terms of a will to arrange oneself within what is manageable, within our power and calculation? [...] What does sacrifice mean here, and why are we speaking of sacrifice at all and not simply of resources, of their utilization and consumption?  

For Patočka, sacrifice is the refutation of calculation, and it is also an alternative to Husserl’s rational solution with regard to the Krisis of modernity and Heidegger’s aesthetical Das Reettende with regard to the metaphysical closure of techno-scientific culture: the culture which forgets about being. Following Heidegger, Patočka argues that the experience of sacrifice renews the thinking of being in contrast to the counting and manipulation of beings. Sacrifice is irreducible to anything objective and quantifiable and for that reason opens a new horizon of the understanding of being. The key notion used by Patočka in this respect is difference (rozdíl), by which he clearly means ontological difference.

Patočka distinguishes authentic sacrifice – sacrifice in a proper sense – from improper sacrifice. The latter involves the economy of exchange. Something is sacrificed and something else is expected in return. For example, modern warfare demands sacrifice for the country in order to create a better world of peace, progress, and so on. One entity is exchanged for another. But Patočka counters: “Sacrifice means precisely drawing back from the realm of what can be managed and ordered, and an explicit relation to that which, not being anything actual itself, serves as the ground of the appearing of all that is active and in that sense rules over all.”

Patočka is not saying that to sacrifice something valuable, such as human life, for something else is inferior or unworthy. At another place, he is clear that there certainly are things that are worthy of suffering. The critical point is the logic of exchange that focuses on beings, things, and entities while forgetting being as such. For this reason, Patočka opts for an authentic sacrifice as a protest against the reduction of being to a thing. He proposes the following definition: “In giving themselves for something, they dedicate themselves to

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6 Patočka, Dangers.
7 Patočka, Čtyři semináře, p. 421.
8 Patočka, Dangers, p. 17.
that of which it cannot be said that it ‘is’ something, or something objective.”9

From this perspective, authentic sacrifice is an experience that is no longer concerned with any positive content: it is “sacrifice for nothing.”10

Before we proceed, one more note on the notion of ‘nothing’ is in order as there are at least three ways to understand the word: (i) no-thing [aucune chose]; (ii) nothing [rien]; (iii) the void [nihil].

No-thing [aucune chose] refers to an object and means there is no object to be exchanged; there is no thing to be gained in sacrifice. Nothing [rien] suggests that there is nothing solid on which to build the act of sacrifice; i.e., nothing positive – no narrative that can make sacrifice feel right; sacrifice is always the shock of negativity. The interplay between these two perspectives is clearly present in Patočka: “A person who sacrifices herself, must go to the end. She is ‘abandoned’ precisely so that there is nothing [rien], nothing [aucune chose] to which he can still cling to.”11

Hence, sacrifice for nothing is: (i) an emancipation from the exchange of beings; (ii) the deconstruction of the thinghood of the human person; (iii) and the place in which Being appears while grappling with its own negativity. However, it is not a welcoming of the nihil as the evaporation into nothingness. Instead of being about the depression of nihilism, it is the question of meaning and the radical embodiment of the search for meaning that Patočka urges us to find in the sacrifice for nothing. To reiterate: Patočka’s phenomenology of sacrifice turns out to be much more existential than descriptive. The following examples of sacrifice will illustrate this theoretical point.

3 Two Senses of Sacrifice in Jan Patočka: A Hypothesis

According to my hypothesis, the concept of sacrifice for nothing is multidimensional and thus contains two principal movements: the heroic and the kenotic one. In what follows, I will refer to two particular examples that illustrate these two moments and elucidate the way Patočka’s conception does not flow into sheer negativity but instead provides us with a specific kind of positivity, even though it is one without any solid content.

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9 Patočka, Dangers, p. 21.
10 Patočka, Dangers, p. 22.
11 This section is taken from the French edition of Patočka, Liberté et sacrifice, p. 31; the translation somewhat embodies this internal ambiguity of translating the concept of nothing in relation to sacrifice in Patočka.
3.1 Heroic Sacrifice for Nothing

In January 1969, Jan Palach, a young student of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, immolated himself in Wenceslas Square in the very heart of Prague. This self-sacrificial act was a sign of protest against the Soviet Occupation of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent so-called normalization regime of the Czechoslovak communists. Many argue, most recently James Dodd, that this event influenced Jan Patočka's turn to sacrifice as a philosophical theme.\(^{12}\) I tend to agree that the events surrounding Jan Palach contributed to Patočka’s (re)turn to sacrifice in his late texts. After all, the previous section of this paper, which summarizes the basic contours of sacrifice for nothing, performs the same gesture as the majority of scholarly literature to refer mostly to the latest texts when considering Patočka's thought on sacrifice. Nevertheless, I would now suggest we refocus our attention on some of the earlier ideas and texts of Patočka because these will: (i) prove that our philosopher had been thinking about sacrifice long before the turbulent times of 1960/70s; and (ii) will challenge the idea that Jan Palach represents a model of sacrifice for him. The second objective is certainly a bit controversial. Thus, I must immediately add a short clarification: I do not intend to claim that Palach did not inspire Patočka. Even though the textual evidence is clear; Palach is never mentioned, it does not necessarily mean that Patočka did not find himself moved by the deed of the young student and did not take it as a challenge to ponder on sacrifice – again. My intention is to suggest that this “frankly shocking” event might better function as a hermeneutical key to how to read Patočka’s conception of sacrifice developed, in fragments and textual traces, even before Palach's self-immolation.

“Life in Balance, Life in Amplitude” (1939)\(^{13}\) is a radical text. In it, Patočka presents two philosophies of life, two ways of inhabiting the world that are polar opposites. Life in balance corresponds with everydayness and ordinary being. It means living according to the given standards, following the mainstream, and trying to enjoy the day without questioning the status quo. In contrast, life in amplitude is an active protest against the normal of the previous approach. It means living in problematicity, that is, to question what is, including things that have been deemed to be granted. Given the historical context of being on the brink of a foreseeable catastrophe (World War II) during the writing of this text, it is understandable that Patočka, provoked, challenged, and issued warnings to the petite-bourgeoisie. However, there are also more fundamental reasons to juxtapose these two ways of being. Patočka's philosophy

\(^{12}\) Dodd, Patočka and the Metaphysics of Sacrifice.

\(^{13}\) Patočka, Life in Balance, Life in Amplitude.
is never simply oriented towards a practical utilization; such a heteronomous goal would be betrayal of the autonomous task of philosophy – the task of thinking.\textsuperscript{14} For Patočka, the true philosophy has meaning in itself and only such philosophy can have societal impact and general relevance. What then is the philosophical reasoning behind a critical reading of life in balance and life in amplitude? The answer can be given in a single word: finitude. Life in amplitude acknowledges finitude. It grapples with finitude, that is, it engages with the experience of being fundamentally shaken, shaken in what is deemed to have meaning, and driven to asking questions about meaning. In other words, life in balance is a natural desire of earthly existence whereas life in amplitude is the movement of transcendence.

Life in amplitude, echoing Heidegger’s \textit{Being and Time}, means to stand out (\textit{ek-sisto}) and to get out of the clutches of everydayness. Life in amplitude accepts the weight of finitude and with that the weight of the world. It rejects lofty constructions of projected paradises, happy-ends of myths and metaphysics (regardless of their religious, political, or ideological origins). It retreats from the pathos of living. In a sort of anti-Kundera gesture \textit{avant la létre}, Patočka cries out that being is definitely not unbearably light.

More precisely, the amplitude is an \textit{élan} for confronting the border of existence. Patočka even somewhat pretentiously says that it is “some kind of higher consciousness.”\textsuperscript{15} However, to defend our philosopher, his position has nothing in common with any gnostic knowledge, and thus is not epistemic arrogance either. We must bear in mind that there is no predetermined content for a life in amplitude. There is hardly any content at all. Finitude is nothing solid (ideologically); rather, it is a moment of shaking – a shaking of everything of an ideological nature. In this sense, human life is called to be a movement towards the amplitude; a movement in the amplitude – a constant exercise and continual repetition of the Socratic challenge: \textit{gnóthi seauton}.

Socratic nature also lies at the roots of the protest stemming from a life in amplitude: the protest against the everyday boredom, the normal, and the unequivocal acceptance of the \textit{status quo}. As Patočka puts it:

\begin{quote}
If we want truth, we are not allowed to look for it only in the shallows, we are not allowed to be fascinated by the calm of ordinary harmony; we must let grow in ourselves the uncomfortable, the irreconcilable,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Patočka, \textit{O dvojím smyslu pojítí filosofie}.

mysterious, before the common life closes its eyes and crosses over to the order of the day.16

What truth is in question here? Patočka does not mean any objective truth but the truth of life. It is exactly that truth which is so important for the line of existentialist authors such as Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky; it is the truth of one’s relationship to the world, which is confronted with finitude and, at the same time, can acknowledge that the essence of humanity is not to feel fulfilled by finiteness.17 Later, Patočka will talk about the fundamental difference between survival – living a life of sheer self-preservation – and living a life where sometimes the meaning is revealed in the giving up the life itself.18 Amplitude is being thrown into the world and bearing the weight of finitude; while still, heading towards something higher, something that Patočka suggests we call “the divine,”19 a life in plenitude instead of a bare life.

Life in amplitude thus equals ‘life in the idea’; the theme of another Patočka text, “Ideology and Life in the Idea” (1946).20 Patočka talks about the idea of truth for which one is called to go to the borderline of existence. This idea, however, is not the Platonic one: the idea of the real being which is not of this world – the world of mere appearances – and to which we must travel out to from our “cave.” Patočka’s Platonism is negative:21 chórismos – the gap between us and the truth – is what matters. This gap between “what is” and “what is possible” is the engine of searching for truth and living in amplitude; that is, it is in the idea. This gap of relative nothingness secures freedom and discloses a responsibility that goes hand-in-hand with this freedom. And this responsibility is ready, in some cases, to sacrifice.

One would search for the word “sacrifice” in these writings without any result. Yet, these ideas help us to answer the question: What is sacrifice? It is a Socratic questioning that interrupts a life in balance. It is the question that withdraws from the boredom of everydayness and deconstructs an existence reduced to a particular existent being. Sacrifice is the ultimate point of a heroic life in amplitude which embraces the idea of truth – the truth of life which is more important than the preservation of its biological functions. Back to our example: Palach’s self-immolation changed nothing [aucune chose]; the Soviets remained and the Communist regime continued to “normalize” the situation.

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17 Patočka, Life in Balance, Life in Amplitude, p. 41.
18 Patočka, K záležitostem Plastic People of the Universe a DG 307, p. 426.
19 Patočka, Čtyři semináře, p. 403.
21 Patočka, Negative Platonism.
This sacrifice gained nothing [rien]; only the questions – the Socratic questions and protests – remained. It is not a coincidence what the pastor Jakub Trojan said when conducting a service at Palach’s funeral: “he made us ask a question.”

It is a highly seductive and appealing concept of sacrifice, isn’t it? The heroism and commitment give hope that one can make a break with power and injustice even while being seemingly powerless. The Socratic protest against a passive polis might gain nothing and yet, in the end, sacrifice for nothing turns out to be very powerful. Patočka will revolve around this existential heroism vis-a-vis the nothing for his whole life. In later texts, however, the tone changes and another aspect of sacrifice comes to the fore. This time, the philosophical inspiration seems to meet the theological one.

3.2  Kenotic Sacrifice for Nothing

In “Four Seminars on Europe,” Patočka responds to the most intimate and problematic part of Christ’s Passion in the gospel of Matthew:

Why have you forsaken me? The answer lies in the question. What would have happened if you had not forsaken me? Nothing would have happened. Something happens only when you forsake me. The sacrifice must be carried to the very end. He has forsaken me so that there would be nothing, nothing that I could still hold on to.22

It is amusing how Patočka manages to refer to the sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth without even mentioning his name. Faithful to this habit, he writes in The World as a Natural Problem: Remediated 33-Years Later:

Truth – the word – has become flesh, the event of being, which has chosen man [sic!] as the locus of its appearing, has found its fullness in a fully ‘true’ man, living entirely in devotion, beyond concern for his own interest, not like creatures of the field and the birds of the air, on the ground of instinct which binds only one existent to another, but rather in the light of being. [...] it can be said that such a fully true man is rightly called the God-man.23

And this God-man, the prophet of being, Patočka argues, must be destroyed and removed from our sight because he reveals the truth through his openness, self-surrender, and kenotic posture. In one way or another, Patočka

22  Patočka, Čtyři semináře, p. 413.
23  Patočka, The Natural World Remediated Thirty-Three Years Later, p. 178 et seq.
complements his understanding of sacrifice as the appearing of Being with the existential perspective of the emptying life. Seinsereignis meets kenosis.

Hearing this, one cannot resist the temptation to quote from the Bible once again:

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Phil 2:6–8

The literal meaning of kenosis is to become empty, to empty oneself, to make oneself nothing. Theologically, the hymn from Philippians speaks of Christ’s annihilation. He became nothing. Kenosis is an engagement with negativity in which a person experiences his or her own finitude in self-surrender. There is also a second layer, however. Kenosis is a revelatory event that reveals the mystery of nothing not only in a moral sense – the person humbled and hanged on the cross – but in an ontological sense. To use a concrete example, the one on the cross is nothing – not a thing (aucune chose) – nothing manageable (rien). He unties his bonds with life and frees himself completely. He has totally emptied himself.

Kenosis is also Patočka’s response to Heidegger: sacrifice is remembering the forgotten question, the question of being. Not a passive participation in das Rettende coming from the sphere of art but the active movement of self-surrender. In other words, this sacrifice is for nothing, indeed, but manifesting something: something that is no-thing, not an object, nothing manipulable, but something that rules over everything.

What appears in the kenotic sacrifice? First, the event of sacrifice provides the person with a new understanding of being because he or she realizes that being is nothing like a thing. Second, and perhaps much more important, is the insight revealed to those who witness the event of sacrifice. To keep with our example of Christ’s crucifixion, those who witnessed and experienced the sacrifice of the one held to be the Messiah – his kenosis – were fundamentally challenged in their self-understanding: they were confronted with a question they had not expected, and this question turned their lives and their perspective on the world upside down. The very moment of witnessing the kenotic sacrifice, however, raises questions rather than giving answers. Paradoxically, I find this to be an unforeseen positive coming from the kenotic movement of

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4 Authentic Sacrifice: Between Nothing and Everything

One of the most striking instances of radical sacrifice, in my opinion, is the sacrifice of the mother for her child. In this respect, I have in mind the ultimate and irreversible sacrifice of one’s life in order to protect or save the life of the other (be it during the childbirth, or any time later in life). The motherly sacrifice is intriguing because when we take into account Patočka’s thought, it might seem that what happens in this sacrifice corresponds with the idea of sacrificial economy of exchange. Instead of nothing, there is something: one life exchanged for another. Hence, the sacrifice of a mother for her child would not be an authentic sacrifice but falls under the rubric of the sacrifice in an inappropriate sense. I want to contest this reading and even want to claim the such interpretation is wrong because it undermines Patočka’s complex conception of sacrifice.

What is the meaning of the ultimate motherly sacrifice, the act in which one person gives up her life for the possibility of another life? Regardless of the circumstances, there is a voluntary loss. But is it an exchange? Does anyone give up something in order to gain something else? Or, is it more like an authentic sacrifice – the sacrifice for nothing? For Patočka, the critical aspect which makes a substantial difference between authentic and inauthentic sacrifices is the relationship to being and beings (Sein und Seiendes). When the exchange of some beings in possession for another beings in possession takes place, we cannot talk about the sacrifice in the proper sense. From there, Patočka draws his equivocal vocabulary of “nothing.” However, when the centre of gravity is being, the situation is different. Jan Palach’s heroic sacrifice did not save anything; he did not gain any particular beings. The meaning of his deed is the revelation of being and its problematicity. On the same token, the kenotic sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth revealed the crude and naked problematicity of being and set the vocation of caring for being for all those who claim to be Christ’s disciples. The motherly sacrifice, one truly gendered sacrifice, combines both the heroic and kenotic aspect even more radically. There is no gain in the case of a mother’s sacrifice, yet there is the heroic decision. What persists is the voluntary loss of a kenotic posture. What remains present is the threshold of negativity in the sense of rien. Yet from the midst of this devouring finitude, life and love are made possible. But love and life are nothing, in the sense aucune chose.
It is an act of nothing, not only in terms of the techno-scientific culture, but also of becoming nothing: rien. There is no consolation as the result of this sacrifice. What persists is the shakiness and it will always continue to be there. In a certain sense, the sacrifice of the mother is a much more radical shattering of meaning than the case of Jan Palach. It is true that, after Palach’s self-immolation and funeral, a wave of unexpected solidarity, perhaps even hope, arose; but these societal sentiments had only a short life. In a certain sense, the motherly sacrifice is more kenotic than the one of Christ because the place, time and space remain empty. In the case of the mother’s sacrifice, however, no arch of triumph, no plaque will be erected. No memorial day will later be celebrated. Rather, every single memory of the child, in fact, even the memory of having no memory that is invoked by a picture of the mother, all these will reactualize the shakiness. Hence, what we witness in the mother’s sacrifice is the loss of everything, gaining nothing but making alles möglich.

The break with the techno-scientific mentality is obvious in the motherly sacrifice. How does it work with regard to the religious sacrificial economy? One short note: the mother’s sacrifice does not claim to save anything. In the religious economy, the deity has a claim on you to sacrifice in the same way that the nation does, e.g., for the good of peace, justice, and the homeland. In contrast, the mother’s kenosis embraces a negativity that can make a future possible without ever having a societally accepted heroic narrative to back up her action.

The negative is turned into a positive. The sacrifice of the mother is the act of life, not so much of an idea. It is both kenotic and heroic, yet without dangerous pathos possibly associated with both attitudes. The kenotic moment restrains the heroic one; an authentic heroism is kenotic because it does not want anything for itself, it does not moralise, it does not exchange. Rather, this movement goes to the threshold of negativity while being aware of the possibility that there is no way back. Nonetheless, this negativity creates something positive: it gives preference to life over survival through the movement of self-emptying, radical self-surrender, and yielding to the other.

5 Conclusion

Sacrifice (almost) for nothing makes us ask questions. But are questions enough? Questioning and living in problematicity is a great thing to achieve, certainly. However, are questions enough for life? Aren’t they supposed to transform us, to bring us somewhere else? Sometimes, in academic papers, we ask questions for the sake of asking – l’art pour l’art. However, I suppose
we could agree that the appearance of thinking critically is different from the genuine state of critical thinking. In this sense, sacrifice made us ask questions but it did not stop there. Where is the promised positivity in the apparently sheer negativity of the sacrifice for nothing?

The interplay between the heroic and kenotic moment reveals how Jan Palach does not stand as a prime model of sacrifice for Patočka. Rather he is a hermeneutical model of how to read something into one aspect of Patočka’s thinking on sacrifice – the Socratic aspect of sacrificing oneself for the idea; of being committed to the idea and not living in ideology – that is a particular kind of heroism. Nonetheless, there is also a second aspect without which Patočka’s concept of sacrifice would not be complete: the kenotic, or if you will, the Christ-like moment. Similar to the Socratic aspect, there is a willingness to go to the threshold of negativity. But this act is more than a sign of protest against injustice, it is the outpouring of love which has a transformative potential. Here I do not mean a metaphysical transformative potential in the first-place, but a very real, existential potential of transforming those who are called to be witnesses of sacrifices that perhaps gain nothing but change everything, witnesses of sacrifices that open the possibility of everything.

One does not run to sacrifice without a positive intention; the heroism of the idea is directed to a transformation of its own kind (e.g., disturbing the public consciousness or saving the life of a child); yet the authentic sacrifice happens in the kenotic opening up of the space of relative nothingness, which also opens space for everything or, in Patočka’s words, “No thing – but this does not mean that this nothing does not contain das All, as the poet said.”

It has become clear that the heroic and kenotic sacrifice are not stages and do not refer simply to the chronological development of Patočka’s thought. Even though different texts might put more stress on one or another perspective of sacrifice, both aspects create a holistic unity: two acts in one movement, or two movements in one act. This is exemplary illustrated in the motherly sacrifice as the model of an authentic sacrifice.

Sacrifice then indeed does not prescribe any positive content; however, even without this explicit positivity, there is hope which happens in terms of questions and challenges to ponder about what “my/our” actions should be. The kenotic heroism of sacrifice for (almost) nothing does not ask for memorials and annual laying of wreaths; it does not ask for a literal imitation either. Sacrifice is the interruption of the status quo, the opening to rethink the given conditions and situations, and a demand to transform negativity into positivity.

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25 Patočka, Čtyři semináře, p. 413.
Biography

Martin Koci is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Philosophy, the University of Vienna and working on the project “Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity in Europe” funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). Recently, he acquired the position of Assistant Professor at the Institute of Fundamental Theology and Dogmatics at KU Linz. In 2016, Martin obtained his PhD from KU Leuven, Belgium. Among Martin's key publications belong Thinking Faith after Christianity (monograph, SUNY Press, 2020) and Transforming the Theological Turn (edited volume, Rowman & Littlefield, 2020). Martin’s research focus is phenomenology, systematic theology and the postmodern conditions of Christianity.

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