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SOCIAL CHANGE AND EMBODIMENT

From our earliest existence as cave dwellers to our present, technologically conditioned life in cities, social change has been a more or less constant feature. Civilizations rise and fall; various technological revolutions alter our patterns of living; changes in production affect the relations between classes. In the West, for example, economies based on slavery in the Roman Empire give way to feudal and then to capitalist social organizations. With the latter came the increasing division of labor and the bureaucratization of social institutions that Weber pointed to. There are also, of course, the factors of contacts between civilizations, colonization, natural disasters and environmental changes. All these and more have been proposed as engines of social change. In this paper, I am going to focus on one constant feature. This is the embodiment that individualizes us.

The context of our embodied individualization is, of course, society. Not only are we born into families with extended kinship relations, we are by nature social animals. As Aristotle expressed this, a single individual "may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts" (*Politics*, 1253 a 5).[1] Apart from the board and the other pieces, the piece has no sense. This is because humans have

1 1 Aristotle, "Politics" in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1129.

to cooperate. Our embodiment brings with it needs for food, shelter, clothing and so on. Yet we are, individually, incapable of fulfilling all these needs. We must work together; and to do this, we have to communicate. The language we use throws a sematic net over our world. We encounter our environment through the prism of the senses conveyed by language. Such senses have the status of a one-in-many: they express the features that are common to different objects. Yet the very embodiment, whose needs drive this process, cannot be common. Its uniqueness appears in the fact that no one can eat for you, sleep for you, breathe for you, or perform for you any of your bodily functions. In its non-substitutability, our body bears witness to Aristotle's remark that the particular can be sensed but not defined.[2] Definition, proceeding through genus and differentiating species, works with what is common. But my body, as mine, *is the flesh that individualizes me*, making me this particular person and not anybody else. As such, it escapes the semantic net of language. There is, here, a certain contradiction in our being. We are social, communicative beings and, as such, exist within a semantic context. As embodied, however, we escape this context. This contradiction, I am going to argue, is a feature driving social change. Social change, in the sense of newness, presupposes embodiment's disturbance of our sematic context.

Sense and Pragmatic Disclosure

The basis of our semantic context is formed, according to Heidegger, by the link between language and the projects by which we attempt to meet our needs. In our practical activities, we understand things in terms of such projects. Here, their sense is utilitarian: things are grasped in terms of their "what is it for" and "in-order-to."[3] Thus, as Heidegger writes, "The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind 'in the sails.'"[4] The focus is on the uses to which we can put the forest, mountain, river, and wind. For example, it is because we want to sail across

2 Aristotle, "Metaphysics," 1036a, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, p. 799.
3 See Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 164–65.
4 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967), p. 70.

a lake that the wind exhibits itself as wind in the sails. As we gain more skill in making our way in the world, the world itself becomes more practically meaningful. We "understand" it in the sense of knowing the purposes of its elements. According to Heidegger, "interpretation," defined as the "considering ... of something as something" articulates this understanding. It makes explicit the purposes of the objects I encounter. In his words, interpretation "appresents the what-it-is-for of a thing and so brings out the reference of the 'in-order-to,'" i.e., its use in a particular project.[5] As a result, the world becomes articulated in the evidence it provides us. Language expresses this articulation. It conveys the senses of the objects we employ. In other words, the semantic context provided by language is rooted in pragmatic disclosure. The commonality of meanings is based on the commonality of interpretations of the what-is-it-for or purposes of things. Our being-in-the-world is, thus, both practical and semantic. It involves both knowing how to make our way in the world by understanding how to employ things and being able to share this linguistically.

Our social identities arise from this pragmatic and semantic context. We are known, individually as the authors of our actions and our words. When asked who we are, we often answer with the name of our profession. We respond, I am a lawyer, a teacher, and so on. Each of these professions points to a world with its own rules for meaningful behavior, the behavior that discloses this world. The same holds for our explicitly collective identities and corresponding actions. Take, for example, the identity of the members of a native hunting party. The collective activities of its members, which include their efforts to track their quarry, to dispatch it and carry it home, disclose the world of the hunt, the very world in which they have not just their individual, but also their collective identity. Similarly, the members of a string quartet disclose the world of the music that they inhabit as they play together. This collective disclosure is correlated to their collective identity as members of the quartet.

5 Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 261.

Social Change and the Semantic Context

Heidegger often speaks about the possibilities that we realize from our actions as if they came from ourselves. He writes, for example, "As existent, Dasein is free for specific possibilities of its own self. It is its own most peculiar able-to-be."[6] Exercising this freedom, Dasein projects as practical goals the possibilities that it finds in itself. It is clear, however, that this freedom is limited. Insofar as Dasein exists as being-in-the-world, it cannot act apart from the world and its resources. Patočka draws out the implications of this when he writes, "Against Heidegger, there is no primary *projection* of possibilities. The world is not the project of [our] liberty, but simply that which makes possible finite freedom."[7] The focus, here, is on our dependence on the world. Thus, Patočka asserts, "I do not create these possibilities, but the possibilities create me. They come to me from outside, from the world that is a framework where the things show themselves as means and I show myself as the one who realizes the ends served by such means."[8] His point is that our freedom to disclose the world is tied to the world's ability to offer us the means for our projects. In his words, "I would not have the possibilities [for disclosing things] if the means for such possibilities, for my goals, did not exist, which means that I could not appear to myself, 'open myself,' understand myself [without such means], just as things could not show themselves, if my action [of disclosing them] did not exist."[9] Disclosure here is limited by the world. Such limitation is what makes it a *genuine disclosure* of the world in which Dasein acts. Since the possibilities that it actualizes come from the world, their actualization exhibits this world.

Given that our semantic context is, at its basis, pragmatic, a change in the world also changes this context. Natural disasters are an extreme example of such change. Thus, a volcanic explosion on the island of Santorin brought about the collapse of Minoan civilization and, with this, extensive transforma-

6 Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 276.
7 Jan Patočka, "Corps, possibilités, monde, champ d'apparation," in *Papiers Phénomenologiques*, trans. Erika Abrams. (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1995), p. 122, my translation.
8 Ibid., p. 120.
9 Ibid.

tions of early antiquity. There are also discoveries of different civilizations with the consequent importation of new products and the stimulation of trade. On the negative side, cultural change can be initiated by invasions where others take over the natives' resources. Thus, the fencing of land and its use for agricultural purposes largely destroyed the native cultures (and social identities) of the North American aboriginals that were based on hunting. We can add to this list the changes in the possibilities of the world afforded by technological progress. All these and more affected the context of pragmatic disclosure. They changed the "what is it for" and "in order to" of our engagement with the world. As such, they shifted our semantic context and led to social change.

Reason and Freedom

There is another factor that is essential to understanding social change. Humans possess reason. The Greek term, logos, signifies not just "reason" or "plan," but also "speech." Here, it indicates our ability to communicate through language. All of these significations are present in the question of reason – the question that asks for the grounds or reasons for what we observe. The question asks, "Why are things the way we perceive them to be rather than some other way?" Applied to nature, it asks after causes. It problematizes the natural world by inquiring into why it runs the way it does. Why, for example, does water boil (and not freeze) when we apply heat to it. Why do stars move in a circle about the earth? What is the cause of the seasons? The search, here, is for the causes of what appears. Such causes can be taken as divine. One can, for example, assert that God brings the rain. They can also be provided by science. We can point to the tilting of the earth's axis to explain the seasons, the rotation of the earth to account for the movement of the stars, and so on.

When the question of reason is applied to ourselves, the effect is different. Here, it problematizes, not the world, but rather our being-in-the-world. Posing it, we ask why we individually and collectively act the way we do. Why, for example, do we organize our society in this particular way – with these particular customs, laws, and institutions – and not in some other fashion. In this questioning of our social and political practices, the focus is on our choices in fashioning our human world. This world is not seen as the result of natural,

unchanging causes. Rather, the premise of such questioning, as Patočka writes, is "that reality is not rigid." The questioning demands is that we act "recognizing [the] plasticity of reality."[1010] Thus, what is revealed is our freedom. Our social and cultural world, rather than being ruled by fixed causes, appears as a result of our choices. We must, therefore, take responsibility for this appearing. This, Patočka believed, is what Socrates disclosed in his constant questioning of those whom he encountered in Athens' Agora. The effect of such questioning was to shake the certainties of his interlocutors. Directed to the political order, his questioning opened up his community to its freedom, i.e., to the fact that the decisions facing it are ultimately its own. In the back and forth of political debate that this type of questioning creates, it opens up the public space for political action and, hence, for the social change based on this.

The Social Origin of Freedom

What, precisely, is this freedom of choice that such questioning presupposes? Where do the choices come from that form its content? On one level, they come from the world, i.e., from the possibilities that it offers us. These set the limits for our finite freedom. We can only work with the resources offered by our surroundings. Within these limits, the origin is those projects – those uses of the world – that we can realize. Now, we were not born with a knowledge of these projects. We learned our projects from others. The same holds for the language describing their use of objects. Thus, our parents, in teaching us to eat at the table, did not begin by first naming the objects we used – "spoon," "fork," "plate," "knife," and so on. They guided our initial practice with a constant commentary. Later, as we learned different uses of these implements, their senses expanded accordingly. I learned, for example, that besides its use at the table, a spoon can also mean something to ladle sugar with, to measure with, to stir with, and something with which to dig with my friends in the garden. My sense of the word expanded with the use of the object that it named. This process continues through life as we learn from others how to make our

10 "Discussion," in *Living in Problematicity*, trans. and ed. Eric Manton (Prague: Edice Oikúmené, 2007), p. 66.

way in the world. Generally speaking, whatever we see others do tends to be regarded (whether favorably or unfavorably) as a human capacity. As such, we regard it as one of our human possibilities. Thus, we learned that a knife can be used to cut or kill. Although we have never used it against another person, we recognize that we could employ it in this way. Of course, given our finitude, we cannot, even if we wanted to, realize all possibilities we have learned from others. This signifies that we are always capable of more than we show. We thus appear *free* in the sense that we *exceed* what can be known and predicted from our past – i.e., from those possibilities we have already actualized.[11]

With this, we have the social origin of our freedom. In terms of its content, which is formed by the possibilities confronting us, the origin is the plurality of society. It is the variable multiplicity of the people we directly encounter or learn about. They provide us with more possibilities than we can ever realize and, hence, with the necessity of having to choose between them. Choice, here, is grounded in both our openness to others and our finitude. Our finitude forces us to choose from among the possibilities that we learn from others.

Embodiment and Newness

This account explains freedom in terms of the availability of the choices open to us. It has, however, a serious deficit when we seek to explain social change. If the choices confronting us come from others, then such choices have already been realized. But if this is so, then how does newness – in the sense of new options – come into the world? The answer lies in the uniqueness that characterizes our embodied finitude. We are by nature social animals, which means that we cannot exist independently. But each of us is a world in himself in the sense that each, individually, brings the world to appearance. Thus, we cannot see out of one another's eyes. The world in its sensuous presence is always individual. Given that the body that we employ in our pragmatic activities and their corresponding disclosures is our own, such disclosures also

11 For the political implications of the position, see James Mensch, "Politics and Freedom," *Idealistic Studies*, 36:1, 2006, p. 75–82.

have an individual cast. Our activities may be similar, but they can never be completely identical. The same holds for our collective activities. No matter, for example, how closely the actions of the members of a string quartet are coordinated, the collectivity of their performance does not obviate the uniqueness of the roles of its members.

Part of the pleasure in hearing a good quartet is listening to the interplay between the individual and the collective. The relation between the two, however, need not always be harmonious. Think, for example, of the disruptive force of Eros. Society attempts to regulate it through marriage. It takes the joining of couples as a social institution. It connects it with the practice of rearing children, taking care of aged parents, and other social obligations. Yet, from Paris's abduction of Helen, to the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet – the erotic relation constantly shows itself as capable of breaking through the conventions that attempt to stabilize our collective existence in society. At the root of this disruption is the embodied nature of erotic attachment. Just as no one can eat for you or sleep for you, so no one can fall in love for you. The individuality of the act is one with the individuality of our flesh. Such individuality disrupts or breaks through our collective identity and practices.

Hannah Arendt writes that "the very capacity for be¬ginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth." In her view, "men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners." Arendt's focus is on the newness brought about by birth. Mine is on the bodily uniqueness of being born – something that, by definition, no one can do for another. Natality initiates newness because it is the beginning of our bodily individuality. Such individuality expresses itself in the tension of our being-in-the-world. On the one hand, we are incapable of existing alone. Our human existence as social animals expresses itself in language – in the common words that we employ to express our use of things. This use is, by and large, social. On the other hand, we are embodied and such embodiment, in its particularity, can be felt, but not defined. It falls, as it were, through the semantic net that our language casts on the world. We feel this contradiction as we struggle to

12 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 211.

express ourselves. This struggle witnesses our attempt to express the unique, to make speakable the unspoken basis of our lives. This disturbance of the speakable results in the new. It recasts the semantic net. It unsettles the pragmatic activites and disclosures that are at the basis of our thought.

Aristotle asserts that outside of society, an individual is either a god or a beast.[13] In fact, inside of it, we contain the tension of the two. Collectively, we are capable of godlike powers. The language that links us together vastly extends our abilities to reason and infer. It allows us to hold concepts stable and compare their relations. Through it, we can communicate and preserve our insights. Reason, however, is not newness. It has no respect for embodied individuals. As Levinas writes with regard to this: "when the I is identified with reason … it loses its very ipseity … Reason makes human society possible; but a society whose members would be only reasons would vanish as a society … Reason has no plural; how could numerous reasons be distinguished?"[14] For society to exist, we require the embodiment that we share with the other animals or "beasts." Within society, then, we combine both aspects. We exist together in the disturbance of what cannot be shared. This disturbance is a persistent, ongoing cause of newness and, hence, of the social change embodying the new. Natality is the repeated entrance of such newness into the world.

13 See Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. cit., p. 1130.
14 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 119.