

Rodolphe Gasché

Europe, or The Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept.

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‘Philosophy and Europe are linked in more ways than one’: that is the dominant theme of this book. Gasché’s aim is ‘to discuss the different conceptions of Europe in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Patočka, and Derrida. In short, this is a philosophical inquiry into “Europe”, one that is exclusively restricted to elaborations of Europe within the phenomenological tradition’ (2). In our ironic, post-philosophical epoch, it seems anachronistic and even foolish to write such an exhaustive philosophical treatise—in effect, four books in 412 pages. Despite this, Gasché offers an admirably unified argument thanks to his constant focus on ‘question Europe’.

Gasché begins with a close reading of Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. In the opening of his Vienna lecture, Husserl claims that Europe stands for the project of reshaping humankind in the light of a ‘genuine’ humanity—a humanity that is much more than membership in a particular ethnicity. Husserl’s project aims to recreate the same ‘breakthrough that takes place in early Greece by the *irruption* into consciousness of the very concept of humanity itself as a concept transcending all particular humanities’ (26, my emphasis). According to Husserl, this irruption gave rise to science. Husserl argues that the European project is based on the idea of thinking and acting in view of what is universal. Although the European spirit is born in Greece, it manifested itself again in the Renaissance, as something ‘which is at once a re-establishment (*Nachstiftung*) and a modification of the Greek primal establishment’ (44). But according to Husserl, the re-establishment realized in the Renaissance was not just an irruption but a rebirth, and involved a critical questioning of the tradition. Galileo, the exemplary scientist of the Renaissance, received the Greek heritage in such a way that he ‘did not feel the need to go into the manner in which the accomplishment of idealization originally arose ... or to occupy himself with questions about the origins of apodictic, mathematical self-evidence’ (49). Euclidian geometry and ancient mathematics know only finite tasks: ‘pure mathematics and geometry have their origin in this method for securing intersubjective truth, and it is this origin that provides them with their true meaning. This is the premise on the basis of which by taking the achievements of these disciplines for granted, Galileo had become oblivious to geometry’s and mathematics’ origin in the life-world that alone makes them meaningful for humankind’ (55). In brief, the modern sciences come into being by *modeling* themselves, thereby disconnecting from the pre-scientific *lifeworld*. Husserl’s lifeworld is not our everyday spatio-temporal world of bodily things, but rather the world of straightforward *intersubjective experiences*. Within the lifeworld, we are also with others. Husserl’s man of everyday life is guided by the *katalon*, the notion of the general or the universal. This is the core of the idea of a universal science that irrupted for the first time in Greece and that constitutes the idea of Europe.

Husserl's conception of this idea was criticized by Heidegger. For Heidegger, what irrupted in ancient Greece is the thought of Being. As Gasché points out, 'in contrast to Husserl, for whom the idea of a universal rational science that breaks forth in ancient Greece is, metalinguistically speaking, neutral, the thought of Being is linked by Heidegger to the specificity of a language, more precisely to the Greek and German languages—that is, to communities or peoples' (107). Heidegger also criticizes the Husserlian notion of universal humankind because it remains beholden to the metaphysics of subjectivity. To ask the question of Being is to inquire into the fate of Europe and the West, and when Heidegger uses the word 'Europe', he refers to the German people, which is the people of the middle of the European continent.

Some twenty years after Husserl, Patočka makes 'the care of the soul' the central object of philosophy and Greek culture. Confronting contemporary Europe with the project of Europe, he maintains that the current decline of Europe, as well as of that of the world, depends on the loss of the European spirit, 'which for the last three hundred years set out to conquer the world, wanting to understand and dominate things on the basis of things, and in absence of world' (221). We can find the idea of Europe in Platonic dialogues, such as the *First Alcibiades*, in which Socrates claims that the soul (*psyche*) is the man himself (*psyche estin anthropos*), and that nothing may be more properly called ourselves than the spirit that moves the body. Here there is evident a certain distance between Patočka and the Husserlian phenomenology in which the primacy of the subject is manifest, a primacy inherent to Husserl's concerns with epistemology. The same primacy occurs in Heidegger, since 'by conceiving of Being by way of a finite subject—Dasein—Heidegger himself realized that this manner of thematizing being is still too close to Husserl's subjectivism' (229). On the one hand, Patočka points out time and again the decadence of modern technological civilization, and he tells a narrative which derives our current historical situation from Platonism and Christianity, which he sees as the two most important efforts to overcome the orgiastic and establish responsibility. On the other hand, he contrasts Platonic mystery (the mythology of the soul's journey towards a transcendent Good) with the Christian *mysterium tremendum*. Patočka distances Platonism from Christianity (107-8), while seeing both as significant influences for modernity. In his book *Plato and Europe*, he notes that 'it is said that European civilization rests on two pillars: one, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the other antiquity' (238). In his view, however, Europe rests on just one pillar: the Greek.

For Derrida, *to be* means to inherit, that is 'one is an heir, even before one explicitly assumes or rejects a particular inheritance' (265), and inheritance is always a task. The prime responsibility of the Europeans is that one towards the tradition of the discourses and counterdiscourses concerning his own identity. If Patočka held that 'Christianity is the only religion that can secure the possibility of a responsibility that is truly European and at the same time really realize the concept of responsibility' (269), Derrida, despite agreeing with Patočka on some points, maintains that Patočka's is a heretical Christianity. Gasché puts it this way: 'Against Patočka's attempt to free Christianity from its Platonic foundation and to conceive of a Europe emancipated from

both Athens and Rome, Derrida stresses the need to remain faithful to both aspects of European memory' (282). Derrida emphasizes the important differences between the Christian and the Greek. He also speaks of an aporia of responsibility to which Europe is exposed, claiming that a condition of the possibility of responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible*. At any rate, Derrida highlights the multiplicity of the sources and identities that intersect in the European heritage.

The book wears its scholarship lightly. Its prose is uncluttered; it gives a thorough treatment of rival views; its notes and bibliography are detailed. Although it is a work of meticulous scholarship, it is accessible to anyone willing to read slowly.

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