

# Nietzsche's Challenge

BY JAMES DODD

*For both Nietzsche and Patočka, something essential to Europe comes to an end in the nineteenth century. How we understand this end is crucial for grasping not only the historical meaning of that time, but also, argues philosopher James Dodd, the potential for Christianity to shape our existence in a meaningful way.*

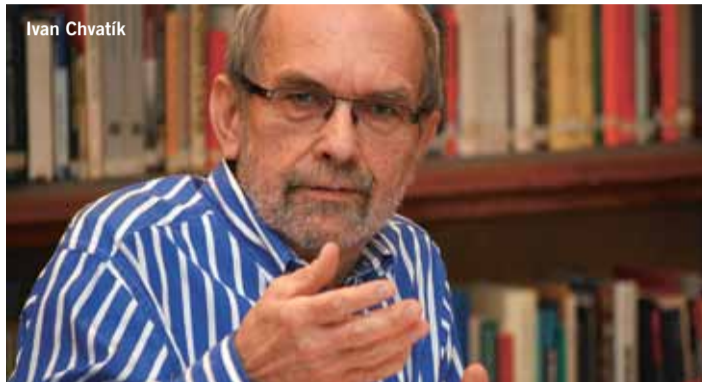
Patočka's reflections in the fourth of the *Heretical Essays* on the 19<sup>th</sup> century are to a great extent political. The long 19<sup>th</sup> century brings the rise of Revolutionary France, the final demise of the Holy Roman Empire, and the emergence of Russia. Yet Patočka looks back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the experience of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and in terms of what he considers to be the meaning of its two world wars: namely, the effective exit of Europe from history, thus of its fall as a dominant center of world power.

What is at stake in this exit? This question is complicated. For Patočka, history is not a secure, stable feature of the world, but a break, a rupture. This rupture takes the form, in Patočka's thought, of a modification of human openness into a distinctively problematic horizon of existence. Thus what is at stake is the meaning of the experience of problematization itself, of whether or not humans embrace their historicity.

Yet, on Patočka's account, with the 19<sup>th</sup> century also comes a specific kind of self-awareness, one that recognizes that Europe is in a state of decline. Characteristic of the age is the strange experience of the fading of the force of problematization itself, the unease at our lack of a focused, poignant experience of the human question.

This is where Nietzsche becomes important. It was Nietzsche, Patočka tells us, who expressed in the most profound fashion the consciousness of Europe in a moral crisis. Yet Patočka also shows a certain impatience with Nietzsche. Nietzsche's "titanic gesture of individuality" seems, Patočka tells us, "comical today," even if his "critique of progress and of the Enlightenment as crypto-nihilism remains valid." (*Heretical Essays*, 93). This may be true, but I would argue that there is still a challenge represented by Nietzsche that Patočka might have overlooked, and it has to do precisely with the question of nihilism.

Nihilism is often described as a failure of faith, perhaps in the face of extreme hardship or social and political turmoil. But in Nietzsche's writings we also find the thought of nihilism as an insight and understanding. In the notebooks from the 1880's, nihilism is identified as the collapse of Christian morality, yet the collapse originates in the radicalization of an element that is essential to this morality, namely the demand for *truthfulness*. The Platonic-Christian demand for truthfulness does not simply insist that one not be lied to; it also demands that



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one should live wholly in and for the truth, as an inwardly established moral solidity of aim and purpose.

Truth, in other words, kills Christianity. But not after its first having been successful. This I think is essential to understanding Nietzsche: it is not enough to understand in what sense Christianity is a mistake, or an error; everything in one way or

another is a mistake or an error for Nietzsche. The key is to understand what Christianity achieved, in order to understand the consequences of its collapse, or what must necessarily occur when, in our disciplined drive for revelation and insight, we discover its partiality, or its mendacity.

The collapse is not sudden, but occurs in stages, each of which in

some sense is experienced as progress. This progressive purification is on the one hand what Nietzsche calls the greatest antidote to nihilism. The rigor and earnestness of the ascetic ideal embodied in Christianity and its post-religious forms gives human beings meaning. Yet on the other hand, mature nihilism threatens this very meaning. For its collapse is not the collapse of partiality, of a failed attempt at achieving the ideal, but rather represents the experience of the collapse of ideals as such. This is for Nietzsche the meaning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "the impracticality of one interpretation of the world [namely, the Christian]—

Nietzsche explains, this thought is a *curse*; it orchestrates an unbearable intensification of a problematicity that cannot be borne, only protested with blind rage. Yet for the moderate, for those who have *no need* for extreme measures, who are sure of their power and with that have a different perspective on the meaning of finality, the nothingness of nihilism does not negate the world but affirms their power. For in the end, after all, this is all about power.

The challenge of this thought for Patočka is twofold. First, it suggests that even though extreme responses are possible, they are perhaps not necessary; there is a response to

*The impracticality of the Christian interpretation of the world arouses the suspicion that all interpretations might be false, says Nietzsche*

one to which tremendous energies have been dedicated—arouses the suspicion that *all* interpretations might be false." (2 [127]).

The key issue is the question of response. One is familiar: the affected respond in rage. One is ashamed, nauseated at oneself and at humanity, for having been lied to for all of these millennia about truth, about morality, about the good; so one lashes out, and thereby moves from the one extreme of absolute morality to the other extreme of absolute immorality. Nihilism, as the legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thus opens the way for that bizarre combination of utmost superficiality and a deep addiction to the *extreme* that is characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet Nietzsche glimpses another possibility, where extreme valuations *are no longer necessary*. "We can endure," as Nietzsche puts it in a notebook entry from this period, "a considerable *moderation* of that value" (117), that is, the value that would aim at a perspective on the whole.

This in turn lies at the crux of the relation between nihilism and the thought of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's thinking. The eternal recurrence is the thought that the lack of a goal is a permanent state; it is the thought that becoming itself is stamped eternally by the being of *nothing*. Again, response is everything. For those for whom the movement of life is unbearable,

the insight of nihilism that is more reserved than the destructive impulses of our devils. Second, it suggests that nihilism does not necessarily entail that step into the abyss of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that we are ready, in other words, to be freed from the discipline of ideals for a life that embraces historicity without a guide, without a crutch.

Nietzsche says at one point in his notebooks from 1887–1888 that "one should never forgive Christianity for having destroyed men like Pascal." (11 [55]) Christianity provided Pascal with the means for his own self-destruction, making the very possibility that he could "live quietly in his room" unbelievable, as if human existence could be anything but a disaster.

But perhaps what is so difficult about the thought of nihilism is finding a way to recognize in it the possibility that human existence is not a disaster. This would demand from us new habits of mind, new approaches to questioning, that run against the very grain of our thinking—a grain that weaves together those fateful spiritual paths of Socratism and Christianity. <

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