Havel on Political Responsibility

Address to Congress. By Vāclav Havel. *Congressional Record - House* (February 21, 1990), pp. H392-95. Because of its brevity, this source is referred to in the text without page numbers.

Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala. By Vāclav Havel. Translated by Paul Wilson. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). Cited in the text as *DP.*

Letters to Olga. By Vāclav Havel. Translated by Paul Wilson. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988). Cited in the text as *LO.*

Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-90. By Vāclav Havel. Edited by Paul Wilson. Translated by Paul Wilson and others. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). Cited in the text as *OL.*

Summer Meditations. By Vāclav Havel. Translated by Paul Wilson. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). Cited in the text as *SM.*

The purpose of this essay is to introduce the nerve of Vāclav Havel's political thought to Americans. I hope to help illuminate the foundation of American political responsibility, the duties Americans have as citizens. I will, for the most part, follow the outline President Havel himself gave in his 1990 Address to Congress. There he makes clear what the Americans can learn from his, as part of the Czech and Slovak, experience. They, and not the Americans, had the experience of dissidents. Hence, they have had much more clearly and profoundly the experience of political responsibility. This experience is the one that the remarkable Czech poet-playwright-philosopher-president articulates with unrivaled eloquence and self-consciousness.

I will use the themes Havel introduces to Americans in his

address as a way of reading his books with the needs of Americans in mind. These themes are at the heart of each of the three volumes of Havel's nondramatic writing that have been recently translated into English. *Open Letters,* a large and rather comprehensive collection of Havel's essays from 1965-90, and *Disturbing the Peace,* a wonderfully wide-ranging and revealing book-length autobiographical interview with Havel, were intended by translator Paul Wilson to be companion volumes. Most recently, Wilson has also translated Havel's reflections on his own and his nation's future in light of his first year's experience as president, *Summer Meditations.* My introduction here treats this body of writing as a whole, because none of these three books was written to stand on its own.

I make some reference to but, for the most part, slight a fourth book of Havel's, *Letters to Olga.* These letters were written from prison by Havel to his wife from *1979-82.* They are "Heideggerian meditations" presented in what amounts to a very abstract code to fool prison censors. They are in some ways Havel's most profound reflections, but determining their meaning and significance must remain a task for another time. The last sixteen letters are indispensable for understanding completely what Havel means by responsibility, and I do not pretend to be able to do them justice. Havel's reflections from prison must eventually become part of a complete account of his dissident experience.

Let me begin with an objection Americans might have to any radical distinction between their own and the dissident experience. For them, the difference is only one of intensity. After all, they also opposed communism on behalf of human liberty. Their opposition did not require as much devotion or sacrifice, but it was unwavering enough to have been the most mighty cause of communism's defeat. The end of communism is, first of all, a victory for the West, and particularly America.

The tendency for some in the West is to view this victory as definitive for liberal democracy, or the contemporary, Western idea of liberty. One view is that this victory is actually the end of history, or the perfection aimed at by millennia of development of political forms.' From this perspective, Havel and his fellow dissidents

merely made a small contribution to this victory, but they have nothing to add about its human meaning. They, like the rest of us, have nothing to do but affirm its truth and justice. Their task is simply to become part of the West, or like America, in every essential respect.

But Americans don't have to become multiculturalist ideologues to suspect that this conclusion is simply not true. Its idea of perfection is oblivious to the ways in which the contemporary West's self-understanding is humanly unworthy. The limitations of the modern West, especially America, have always been seen best by those who view it from outside.

Here it is sufficient to begin by mentioning the best book on America, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America.* Tocqueville, an uprooted aristocrat with a devotion to political life and to the human soul for their own sakes, spent most of his political life opposing what, to him and even to us, seemed to be the most powerful modern alternatives, bourgeois liberalism and socialism. He found both of these alternatives to be misanthropic. They both denied in theory the reality and goodness of human distinctiveness or liberty. They both aimed in practice to reduce human behavior to predictable or systematic regularities. For Tocqueville, the two most powerful alternatives of his time seemed almost indistinguishable in their opposition to the political greatness and inner freedom that characterize human liberty, or man's true greatness. Nevertheless, he remained devoted to the possibility of combining democracy and liberty in a way that does unprecedented justice to that greatness.'

The dissidents from Central and Eastern Europe carry on Tocqueville's criticism of America and the contemporary West from the outside. They reach remarkably similar conclusions about the misanthropy animating the propensities toward the systematic denial of human liberty in modern theory and practice. The most penetrating and attractive of the dissident writers are Havel and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Havel and Solzhenitsyn, like Tocqueville, are friendly critics of liberal democracy. Their criticism is "partial," because they believe that human liberty can have a future in the West.'

With Tocqueville, Havel and Solzhenitsyn see that, most fundamentally, human identity or personality has weakened. They mean not to destruct the West, but to show how its excesses, if unresisted, will cause its self-destruction. They do mean to eradicate its genuine achievements in pursuit of political and economic liberty. They aim to reconstitute them on a more securely human foundation. Insofar as they are critics of the modern world with the experiences of its excesses in mind, they should be called postmodern. But they show us that postmodernism need not be deconstructionism.

Havel's criticism of the West, and especially of America, is quite similar to the one Solzhenitsyn forcefully gave in his 1978 Harvard commencement address.[4] This kinship can be attributed partly to the fact that they both reflected on the basis of similar dissident experiences. But Havel also had the opportunity to read Solzhenitsyn's address, and he clearly learned from it. He voiced his agreement with its central contentions.

Havel's agreement with Solzhenitsyn is profound, but not obvious. He rarely acknowledges his debt, and he does not do so at all in his speech to Congress. He criticizes the Americans more gently and indirectly, with a charming irony. He does so in part because he spoke to Congress not primarily as a dissident, but as his nation's president. He had a responsibility not to arouse American hostility or suspicion.

But Havel is also gentler than Solzhenitsyn because he observed Solzhenitsyn's failure to persuade many Americans. Havel's rhetorical superiority is manifest in the great respect his thoughtful criticisms of America receive in such places as *The New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books,* as well as from more conservative sources. One reason to encourage Americans to consider seriously Havel's criticisms is to lead them to give Solzhenitsyn a new hearing. A review of the main themes of Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address also turns out to be the most illuminating introduction to the same themes in Havel's thought. It makes clear the closeness, if not the identity, of the concerns of the two dissidents.

Solzhenitsyn's Warning to the West

According to Solzhenitsyn, "the most striking feature" about the West to an "outside observer" is "[a] decline in courage." He means primarily "civic courage," or the willingness "to risk one's precious life in defense of the common good." But this "decline" is merely a symptom. The real disorder is an excessive, habitual concern for material "well-being" at the expense of everything higher. The history of the modern West is progressively less cultivation of the soul or virtue or "voluntary self-restraint," beginning with courage. What is disappearing is the "most precious possession" of human beings, "our spiritual life."

Solzhenitsyn already sees evidence of the West's materialistic orientation in the founding principles of modern states, such as those expressed "in the American Declaration of Independence." This founding theory is best viewed as a project to be actualized in pursuit of happiness, with happiness being defined progressively more materialistically. This project would seem to have been completed in the contemporary "welfare state." Its unprecedented prosperity and liberty should have produced happiness, if the founding theory were true.

But Solzhenitsyn says that experience has shown that modern psychology is flawed. He also opposes to it a fundamental scientific observation. Too much comfort and prosperity, "a high degree of habitual well-being," is, in any "living organism," bad even for that organism's body. The West is failing even in terms of comfortable self-preservation. Its people cannot secure their bodies' safety even against internal violence and criminality.

But the record of the pursuit of well-being is even worse in terms of happiness. The people of the West, living largely without a civic courage or genuinely spiritual life, are full not of enjoyment but of anxiety and fear. They are anxious about their status in a world dominated by material competition. They are more afraid of death than ever before, because they seem to have so much more to lose. They have deprived themselves of the gifts of nature and God-courage and spiritual life-that are the precondition for what happi-

ness is possible for human beings. "Only by the voluntary nurturing of in ourselves of freely accepted and serene self-restraint," Solzhenitsyn contends, "can man rise above the stream of materialism.

Another sign of the absence of voluntary self-restraint in the West, especially America, is its excessive legalism. Personal manifestations of freedom and responsibility have been replaced everywhere by the fearful rule of law. Evil is blamed on "misguided social systems" or poorly designed impersonal mechanisms, and not on personal irresponsibility. The capacity to rise above environmental determination, or choose between good and evil, is simply denied. Hence human freedom, properly speaking, is reduced to part of the pursuit of happiness understood materialistically. But a world without personal self-restraint weakens individuals as they surrender the "will power" always required for self-defense. "To defend oneself," Solzhenitsyn asserts, "one must be ready to die." No view that denies personal responsibility for one's own and one's nation's destiny can explain one's willingness to risk death. Solzhenitsyn, most radically, traces the error informing modern psychology and politics to "the very foundation of modern thought," or "the prevailing Western view of the world which arose with the Renaissance and found political expression since the age of Enlightenment." He calls this turn in thought "humanistic autonomy" or "anthropocentricity," the view that man is free from "any force above him." It is the attempt to define man without "the concept of the Supreme Complete Entity" to "restrain our passions and our irresponsibility," to define man without the concepts of God and self-restraint. Experience has shown that if man is without "a sense of responsibility to God and society," to what is above him, then he cannot help but enslave himself to forces below him, to matter or environment.

The premise of the anthropocentric way of thinking is that man has no higher "task" than "the achievement of happiness on earth." But it would seem that this apparently low and simple goal is not a human possibility. Solzhenitsyn reminds us that "if man were born to be happy, he would not be born to die."

Anthropocentric humanism turns out not to be a humanism at

all. Its credibility is based on the denial of the reality and goodness of what really distinguishes human beings. Its aim is to compel the individual to surrender knowledge of his mortality and his courageous and spiritual responses to that knowledge. Its goal of "carefree consumption" can be achieved only through "a total engrossment in everyday life," through the individual's forgetfulness of what separates him from his environment.

This "total engrossment" Solzhenitsyn found to be the goal of the party in the East and commercialism in the West. He also found an "unexpected kinship" between the theories of Western humanism and socialism. Solzhenitsyn carefully emphasizes his complete opposition to "socialism," because it "leads to a total destruction of the human spirit and the leveling of mankind unto death." But he wonders how and where the West will find the inner resources to resist such leveling. When freed completely from the influence of its Christian heritage, its anthropocentric humanism turns out to be nothing more than a more incoherent form of materialism than socialism, and it knows of no way to defend its incoherence.

Solzhenitsyn's main worry in 1978 was that the nations of the West would be defeated by the communist ones. But he also made it quite clear that the destructive misanthropy of the modern West would not disappear with communism's collapse. Hence he said he could not recommend Western society as "a model" for post-communist Russia. He said that the human weakness of materialism is actually much more pronounced in the West than in the communist-ruled East. In the East, communism was discredited as an ideology. Those who experienced its consequences could not believe its promises. But in the West its ideological idealism remained attractive, because the intellectual kinship is felt between contemporary Western and communist aspirations.

Solzhenitsyn observed the "weakening of the human personality" in the West to a degrading uniformity because of its well-being in excess. In the East, because of the suffering and resistance induced by communism, the human personality had become more profound and "interesting," or "firmer and stronger." Solzhenitsyn, for this reason, seems to find more hope for a revitalization of

properly human existence in the East.'

Solzhenitsyn's hopeful conclusion to his Harvard address was that the modern world is an error revealing itself to itself as such. It is coming to be seen for what it is, an excessively materialistic overreaction to the too exclusively spiritual orientation of the Middle Ages. A new "spiritual effort" based on human reflection on the experiences of these two excesses is possible. It can lead to a "new height of vision" and a new level of human existence. This new level will incorporate the partial truths of medieval spiritualism and modern materialism. It will do justice to both "our physical nature" and "our spiritual being." Solzhenitsyn clearly points to the possibility of a postmodern age, one in which the modern world will be to some extent redeemed as its precondition.

Havel's Gift to America

Havel addressed Congress as his nation's president approaching America for economic and political assistance. He readily acknowledges the political and economic superiority of the Americans. He says that his people have much to learn from them concerning "how to educate our offspring, how to elect our representatives, and the ways how to organize economic life so that it will lead to prosperity and not to poverty." He adds only that the Americans may have one lesson to learn from the Czechs and Slovaks, a philosophical one. It seems, at first, that this lesson is relatively unimportant, and certainly ofvery limited practical relevance. Havel seems far from Solzhenitsyn's assertion that America is no model.

Havel cautiously introduces his genuine point, the dependence of political life on philosophy. He says that his speech has two parts. The "first is from a political point of view," the second is from a point of view we might call philosophical." The difference is between particular policies that ordinarily animate political life and the human foundations of that life. The second point of view shows why a human being might accept "political responsibility."

Havel offers this point of view as a gift from his people, one required by simple justice or perhaps his people's pride. They must find "something to offer" those who are "well-educated, powerful,

and wealthy" in return. They have learned something from their "bitter experience" of "human suffering" and "above all enormous humiliation." What they know seems to come from an aspect of their experience that is different from and inferior to the Americans'.

But this conclusion is not simply true. Havel finds "something positive" in the experience of his people. They have "a special capacity to look, from time to time, somewhat further" than those who "live a somewhat normal life." It is also the case that someone "pinned under a boulder has more time to think about his hopes than someone who is not trapped that way." The experience of Havel's people is extraordinary, full of suffering, oppression, and degradation. These distinctive features have actually been good for thought.

When life is ordinary, comfortable, and relatively unconstrained or permissive, thought is constrained or even rare. The Americans seem to have plenty of time to think, but their "normal" lives seem to prevent them from doing so. Havel leads us to wonder who is really free, and to think more clearly about why too much well-being is bad for human beings.

Havel elsewhere is much more emphatic about the "existential," even "metaphysical," significance of the "bitter experience" of living under communist or what he calls "post-totalitarian" rule (SM, 126; *OL,* 131).' He observed, prior to 1989, that "something in me rebels against the claim that history has condemned us to the unenviable task of mere unthinking experts in suffering." This characterization comes from those "in the `free world' who don't have time to suffer and have time to think" *(OL, 275).*

The "free world" defines freedom as freedom from suffering and for the leisure to reflect. Havel, as a Czech and as a human being, rebels against that definition. He regards a world formed by that view of freedom as humanly unworthy. It is not human freedom at all. Like Solzhenitsyn, he was impressed by the human strength that is the product of his people's experience, and by the human weakness of those who try to define freedom without accounting for the cause of that strength.

For Havel, as for Solzhenitsyn, the specifically modern view is that the institutionalization of peace, freedom, and prosperity will

produce human progress in all areas, including thought. Perhaps the most important product of technology, from this view, is leisure for reflection. But, from Havel's view, modern liberalism has not been good for thought, because human thought requires far more than leisure.

Havel characteristically opposes to this modern view the example of the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka, who died as the result of his brutal treatment by the police while being interrogated for his dissident activities.' Havel asks whether "it is not symptomatic that the best-known victim of the struggle for human rights is the most important philosopher" in Czechoslovakia. There must be some relation between Patocka's political courage and his thought, between the risk of life required of the dissident and profound reflection. Patocka, in thought and deed, opposed the view that "thought and sacrifice" are "mutually exclusive" *(OL, 275-76).*

Havel remembers that Patocka once wrote that "a life not willing to sacrifice itself to make life meaningful is not worth living" *(OL, 265).* He remembers more to make Patocka's meaning clear. A human life is one which is "capable of sacrificing something, in extreme cases, everything, of the banal, prosperous life-that rule of `everydayness,' as Jan Patocka used to say-for that sake of that which gives life meaning." Without the "courage of sacrifice," there are "no moral barriers against evil," against what destroys human souls and human bodies *(OL, 263).* Patocka agrees with Solzhenitsyn that courage is what raises human beings above material determination and makes possible meaningful or spiritual life. It is what makes self-defense in every respect possible.

Havel uses Patocka in a way similar to the way Plato uses Socrates. It is the noble death that gives weight or meaning to the words of the philosopher. But Socrates's death, in comparison to Patocka's, is ambiguous or even selfish. He opposed the way of life of the Athenians on behalf of the truth. He did not die for their rights or dignity. He died to preserve his own, distinctive devotion more than on behalf of his fellow citizens.

Patocka's slogan about the relationship between sacrifice and meaning is meant to replace Socrates's about the unexamined life.

The two philosophers seem to disagree about what makes life worth living. Perhaps Socrates would say that Patocka seems to be more moralistic than thoughtful. He seems to subordinate thought to sacrifice.

But, for Patocka, the possibility of courage or sacrifice is what allows human beings to come to terms with, and hence to reflect about, what they really know about human existence. It is an escape from the self-forgetfulness of everydayness, from what Solzhenitsyn calls "total engrossment" in the affairs of the moment. Patocka's most immediate debt for his understanding of self-forgetfulness is the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who is perhaps best-known for his wonderful description of this loss of identity in "average everydayness."[8] This loss is also what Allan Bloom described as flatness of soul in his best-seller about educated and prosperous contemporary Americans.[9]

This self-denial characteristic of American life is reflected in characteristically American theory. Harvey Mansfield, Jr. has recently reminded us that the most American of the philosophers, John Dewey, might be best distinguished by the prideful consistency by which he described average everydayness as the whole of human experience.[10] Dewey is remarkable, especially in light of his many elegant accounts of growth and decay, for his total avoidance of the fact that human beings are self-conscious mortals, that they die alone and know it.

Patocka means to say that the movement away from everydayness can be toward the truth about human existence. The capacity to sacrifice is what opens one to the truth. Patocka did not really view his saying as incompatible with Socrates's at all. Only the life willing to sacrifice itself for human meaning can be an examined one. Patocka does mean to give a clearer account of the relationship between word and deed than even Plato.

What Havel calls "the horizon of highest sacrifice" is the source of human truth and meaning. Hence he says it is "what constitutes" human life, "directly and primordially" *(OL,* 266). One is able to live a human life in light of the truth, but only because of the possibility of both "intellectual and moral courage" *(LO,* 363). Havel is far from

opposing citizenship to philosophy, or one's own devotion or dignity to the truth about Being. But without the horizon of highest sacrifice, "nothing is worth anything" *(OL, 266).* Whenever a human being identifies morality with expediency, he always "in the depth of his spirit . . feels that nothing matters" *(LO,* 361).

For Havel, distinctively modern thought is constituted by the rejection of both the reality and the goodness of the horizon of highest sacrifice. With its abandonment, political theory, beginning with Machiavelli, is reduced to "a rational technology of power." With that definition, human identity or personality begins to disappear. In the "modern state," the one founded on a Machiavellian foundation, "rulers and leaders" with particular personalities and responsibilities are gradually replaced by "anonymous and depersonalized" systems of rules. "States," as a result, "grow more machinelike," and "people are transformed into statistical choruses." "[T]he sole method of politics" becomes "quantifiable success." Havel shares Solzhenitsyn's thought that, with the abandonment of courage as the foundation for voluntary self-restraint, human life is constantly threatened by reforms based upon "a philosophy of sheer negation of humanity." This turn in thought, they both agree, begins with the Enlightenment *(OL,* 251-60).

Patocka, then, is no modern philosopher. The distinction between his and the modern view is evidence, for Havel, of the fundamental significance that must be given to "what is called `dissent' in the Soviet bloc." He calls dissent "a specifically modern experience, the experience of life at the ramparts of dehumanized order" *(OL, 269).* It is a human rebellion against the project to negate humanity. This rebellion is what stirs within Havel when the "free world" denies truth and meaning to his extraordinary experience.

Havel says, at one point, that the dissidents "are not primarily denying or rejecting anything." Their efforts have the intention of "affirm[ing] their own human identity." They, on behalf of their humanity, deny "only what is false and alienating about their experience" *(OL,* 168-69). Living within a lie is to lose oneself in the anonymity or impersonality of the course of everyday life.

Living within a lie, Havel sometimes says, is not only modern

possibility, but a constant temptation of human existence.[11] He can do so because he holds that "[t]he essential aims of life are naturally present in every human person." Against the modern view, he asserts that nature orients human beings toward certain ends, and that they can affirm or deny what they really know about those ends. They include "some longing for rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence" *(OL,* 145).[12] These ends depend upon one's knowledge of death, of one's particular existence and one's "alienation" from Being. This self-awareness is the consequence of the gift of speech mysteriously given to "the cosmic life form we call man," and the responsibility given to him to live well in spite of that knowledge *(OL,* 377-78).

Human beings can affirm or deny their natural ends and their moral responsibility in light of the truth. Human life, characteristically, is a mixture of affirmation and negation, truth and lie. This mixture, which is rooted in man's mixed experience as part of and outside of Being, is the "paradoxical nature" which is man.[13] It is the "source" of human life's "beauty and misery, its tragedy and greatness" (LO, 374-75). Hence "each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to terms with living in the lie." No one constantly affirms his identity. "Everyone," Havel observes, "somehow succumbs to a profound trivialization of his inherent humanity, and to utilitarianism," or to the view that man was born to maximize his material happiness. This view, as Solzhenitsyn says, would only be true if man were not born to die. But human beings are inclined to suppress that fact: "In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and flow comfortably along" *(OL,* 145; *LO,* 319-20).

Havel says that the dissidents are part of "an eternal, never-ending struggle . . . by people who think about the world and eternity against people who only think about themselves and the moment." Because human beings are open to eternity, they know that their bodies, at least, are not eternal. Thought, which includes a painful awareness of one's own death, can be negated selfishly by losing oneself in the moment. The struggle undertaken by the dissidents against the

modern negation of humanity mirrors the one that takes place "inside everyone." That struggle "is what makes a person a person, and life, life" *(SM,* 16). Hence the remark about the experience of dissent being particularly modern must be qualified. What is particularly modern only is the extremity of the negation to be opposed.

What the Czech and the Slovaks can offer the "free world," then, is "the idea that a price must be paid for truth, the idea of truth as a moral value." They have acquired a "sense of responsibility" that "grows out of . . . certain moral experiences that compel one to transcend the horizon of one's personal interests" in the direction of highest sacrifice *(SM, 98-99).* The result is "a relatively higher degree of inner emancipation" than human beings ordinarily experience (OL,177). What the free world needs is a better understanding of the truth about moral freedom.

Havel, the dissident, observed, from a distance, "individual actions and social upheavals in the `free world." He was uncertain that they were "characterized by penetrating thought," because they did not seem to be morally serious. They seemed superficial because "for the most part no great price need be paid for the enthusiasm," This superficiality Havel found in the peace movement, which could not help but be a criticism of the dissident movement. It seemed to place peace above all differences in principle or human meaning, even above resistance to totalitarianism. Havel viewed the peace movement as literally demoralizing in its denial of the meaning of the horizon of highest sacrifice, of the price that must be paid for truth. He viewed it, more precisely, as incoherent in its moralism. It was, in its idealism, an attempt to transcend but it was decisively determined by the banality of the everyday life of the Western consumer *(OL,* 291-322). *This* idealism, Havel ironically observed, is, from his dissident perspective, "a bit too earnest, perhaps slightly histrionic" in its fear of war. Hence it lacks "the skepticism about utopianism" *(OL, 308)* that Havel finds at the core of all thoughtful responses to the truth about human existence.

Havel concludes his speech to Congress with a way of opening America to his horizon. He suggests that American liberty also originates with men like Patocka and Havel. He calls attention to our

founders, the authors of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. They, our "best minds," assumed "practical responsibility" for their ideas. Jefferson's words concerning the foundation of government in consent, Havel says, "were a simple and important act of the human spirit." They were an act, apparently, because they were the foundation for dissident resistance. But Havel adds "[w]hat gave meaning to the act ... was the fact that the author backed it up with his life. It was not just his words, it was his deeds as well."

Havel causes Americans to wonder whether their founders articulated properly the relationship between words and deeds, whether they made clear the human meaning or spirit of the doctrine of consent. Its foundation must be found within the horizon of highest sacrifice, and not as the modern or Lockean Jefferson sometimes said, in the material desires for security and comfort. Havel departs from modern, which, in the case of the American founders, is Lockean thought, by rooting consent and hence rights not in the body but in the soul. The relationship between words and deeds, or thought and sacrifice, ought to be understood to be the human meaning of even the American foundation. That meaning must be understood even to protect rights as Locke understood them. The American revolutionaries showed what the dissidents knew: "one idea is rooted in our common awareness; that the inability to risk, *in extremis,* even life itself to save what gives it meaning and a human dimension leads not only to the loss of meaning but finally and inevitably to the loss of life as well" (OL, 311).

Modern Science and Ideological Systems

Havel shows that the "free world" does not properly understand the relationship between human thought and deed. In his address to Congress, he speaks specifically of "one great certainty" that his dissident experience has given him: "Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim." This truth must have certainly been news to Congress. The Americans, it seems, are much less certain than the Czechs and the Slovaks that Marxism is untrue. The Marxist view is that human consciousness is determined

by impersonal forces beyond human control and responsibility. This view dominates, in a number of forms, the sophisticated social scientific thinking of many Americans. It is, as Havel says, the metaphysical view that characterizes as a whole modern science and its product, modern technology.

Havel joins Solzhenitsyn in viewing Marxist theory and post-totalitarian practice as manifestations of the deepest tendencies of modern metaphysics. Havel also joins Solzhenitsyn in warning the Americans that the disintegration of communism, by itself, hardly means the end of modern excesses. "We are still," Havel tells Congress, "under the sway of the destructive and vain belief that man is the pinnacle of Creation, and not just part of it, and therefore everything is permitted." What distinguishes our civilization, Havel agrees with Solzhenitsyn, is its arrogant, anthropocentric atheism. It is, in fact, the first and likely the last atheistic civilization (DP, 10-11).

This vain belief, Havel elsewhere makes clear, is a core of modern scientific thought, the "attempt to seize nature" and hence "to abolish God and play at being God." The aspiration is toward a "science" so powerful and so knowledgeable that "it would hold the order of Being in its hand." Modern, scientific man "began to believe that, as the pinnacle and lord of creation, he understood nature and could do what he liked with it." He arrogantly came to view his aspiration as reality. Because he could control nature, he could recreate it for whatever purpose he pleased. He "could therefore plan for a life of happiness for all," that is, as Solzhenitsyn makes clear, happiness on earth. He could conquer human misery, including, presumably, the unhappiness that comes with consciousness of death *(OL, 252-54).*

Modern thought begins with the most radical claim of freedom. It is possible for human beings to "play" or use without moral responsibility the power of God. They can do so because God as a limit on human possibilities is nothing but a "subjective illusion." Freedom begins with the thought that everything is permitted because there is no order to which human beings must submit. Natural and divine order, in truth, are names given to human impositions.

It would seem that those who play God can do what they please; but they are not really God. Even they are limited by the nature of scientific impositions. The scientist's power is essentially impersonal. He means to replace the illusory disorder of subjectivity with an objective and universal order. He depends on "the fiction of objectivity stripped of all that is concretely human" *(OL,* 255). He means to replace the personal perspective with that of no one in particular.

The scientist's radical claim for freedom depends on a universal determinism, one that denies the efficacy of any personal will, even that of a personal God. Hence, he must deny even his own personality or identity. Even his freedom must disappear in the "system," which is ruled by no one in particular. Paradoxically, his assertion of radical freedom is the radical denial of even his own freedom.

Modern science depends on the systemization of all human behavior. Its utopian "vision," Havel says, is of "a scientifically calculable and technologically achievable `human welfare'" *(OL,* 255). Its actualization would simply be the reduction of human animation to that of the universal, predictable regularities of bodies in motion in pursuit of material satisfaction. The utopian vision of "a heaven on earth," a world without evil and human suffering, is a world without human beings. "In an ideally homogeneous society," Havel observed from prison, "there would be no criminality because there will be no human life" *(LO,* 312). Any homogeneous account of Being abstracts from human life.

For Havel, what distinguishes "the world of advanced totalitarianism," the most advanced form of the modern project, is the denial of "individuality." Its aim is the "uniformity" of "centralism," a "standardized life" rooted in a "herd morality." This life is "the standardized nothingness" of an "undifferentiated people with undifferentiated stories." For such a people, "prison" becomes "a `correctional institute': a wastebasket for peculiar humans and their bizarre stories." Having one's own will or identity is an error which must be corrected. The homogeneous blandness one properly associates with prison life is found everywhere but in prison *(OL,* 340).

"Systems," in a remark intended to comprehend modern pro-

pensities everywhere, "have deprived us-rulers as well as ruled-of our conscience, our common sense, and natural speech and, thereby, of our actual humanity" *(OL, 257).* We have already seen that in the modern state the distinction between rulers and ruled disappears, as all submit to impersonal rules. The "common sense" distinctions that grounded the human conscience, or the capacity to give meaning and direction or rule one's own life also disappear. Because the claim to play God was "vain," it could do no more than be "destructive" of actually human or limited and responsible liberty.

But this modern, systematic denial of human responsibility, Havel usually says, is not and cannot become completely true. Systemization is always opposed by the heterogeneity or plurality and disorder that genuinely characterizes human life. Modern science, in truth, always denies as well as destroys humanity. The theoretical expression of this denial Havel calls "ideology."

An ideology is the claim that the world is or can readily be a system. It is "a consistent explanation of the world's contradictions and a comprehensive plan for resolving them." It is, perhaps more precisely, the lie that systematic thinking can capture the truth about human existence, "the illusion that the system is in harmony with, human order and the order of the universe" *(OL,* 133-34).

Ideology justifies systematic imposition or, better, one's decision to submit to it. But its very existence is evidence of the imperfection of the imposition. Havel says that any ideological system is "thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies" *(OL,* 135). The lies, it seems, never stop being recognized for what they are. Ideological affirmation is always hypocritical and degrading.

From this perspective, ideology "is a veil behind which human beings hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, their adaptation to the status quo." It covers their all too human willingness to live within the impersonality of the lie. It performs, Havel says, an "excusatory function," excusing what is really "a specious way of relating to the world" *(OL,* 133-34).

To some extent, ideology "enables people to deceive their conscience" through "the consignment of reason and conscience to a higher authority," such as "historical necessity" (OL,155, *288).* But

this allegedly higher authority is always something low, a systematic or material principle. The "essence" is really an attempt to "surrender . . . human identity in favor of the identity of the system" *(OL,* 143). But if human beings were actually so determined, they would have no need to ennoble or justify "the low foundations" of their submission *(OL, 133).*

Ideology is constantly in opposition to the truth about human existence. It succeeds as it "loses touch with reality" with the lie that there is no reality beyond human imposition. Ideology actually means to replace reality, somehow to "become reality itself, albeit a reality altogether self-contained." It means to use "theory" to shape reality, transforming the natural or properly human function of thought *(OL,* 178).

The goal of the ideological system is to "falsify everything," to capture everything with lies *(OL,* 136).[14] The result of such efforts, Havel observes, is "paradoxical." The paradox is that theory or ideology, created as the use of knowledge to maximize power, ceases to serve power. Instead, "power begins to serve ideology" *(OL,* 178). It becomes "captive to its own lies" *(OL,* 136).

Human dictators, who rule in their own personal interest, were replaced by the "dictatorship of the ritual," certain "routines of power" which compel the conformity of everyone. Havel's own experience was the "automatism" of "the system's own internal laws" was often "far more powerful than the will of any individual" *(OL,* 140).

But Havel refuses to affirm the existence of a world without human will. Power never becomes wholly "innocent," because human beings never become wholly oblivious to the truth. "Individuals," he observes, are only "almost dissolved in the ritual" *(OL,140).* A world in which they were completely dissolved would be one without ideology and dissident opponents to it.

The ideological system, as Havel sometimes says, does not even aim at perfect control. Based on the perception that individuals cannot really always see lies as the truth, the genuine ideological requirement is only that they "behave as though they did" (OL,136). They conform to the lie through their acceptance of life under it. But

their lives remain incoherent because they can still distinguish between truth and lie. They degrade themselves because they consciously put security and comfort before sacrifice on behalf of truth and their dignity.

This rule through fear is never totally reliable. It is constantly threatened by those who would speak and act publicly on behalf of the truth, those who really cannot be comprehended by the utilitarian calculus that produces systematic behavior. Havel sees that the Soviet Union had to expel Solzhenitsyn. He was the greatest of dangers *(OL, 379-80).* But the expulsion of this or that dissident does not obliterate the possibility of dissent as long as the distinction between truth and lie is perceived by anyone. In this light, "Solzhenitsyn's expulsion was . . . a desperate attempt to plug up the dreadful wellsprings of truth." The possibility of individual transformation by living in truth, the Soviets recognized, "might one day produce political debacles unpredictable in their consequences" (OL,155). That, of course, is what eventually happened. History, not to mention the behavior of the Soviets, provides evidence to support Havel's contention that "the chief threat to all anonymous power" is "an honest, free-thinking man" *(OL, 264-65).*

Human beings are, in truth, somewhat unpredictable. Their thought and action can never be captured by *any* systematic theory, which is why President Havel is suspicious of the comprehensive claims of both capitalist and socialist theoreticians, of what he calls the "dogmatism" of both Right and Left *(SM, 60-65).*[15] Even the Soviets, finally, were not completely systematic or perfectly dogmatic theoreticians. They acted as if they recognized the truth that in every human society there is "the hidden openness to the truth," including "repressed longings for dignity and fundamental rights." There is always "a human predisposition to the truth," one which is not limited to a certain kind of individual or certain times or places *(OL, 148).* The Soviets really knew that history could not fundamentally transform human life or nature.

Havel has to explain what it is about "modern humanity" that makes "the creation or at least the toleration" of "ideological systems" possible. We have already noted that he views human beings as

responding both to the truth and to lies. There is "obviously something in human beings" which both "responds to the system" and "paralyzes every effort" at resisting it in the name of the truth about one's own identity *(OL,* 144). But why is the "hypnotic charm" of ideology *(OL,* 129) particularly powerful for human beings in our time?

Havel explains that one effect of modern science has been to uproot human beings from what he calls the "natural world." In this ordered or measured world, the "common sense" distinctions of personal experience seem to be given, or beyond human choice or control. The foundation of these distinctions seems secure, although also somewhat mysterious and elusive. These distinctions begin with those between God and man and good and evil. From them flow the distinctions that constitute honor and dishonor, justice and injustice, as well as courage, pity, and friendship *(OL,* 251-52).

Modern science denies that the personal experiences of the givenness of these distinctions are genuine or good. They are viewed as matters of merely "private concern," "prejudices and whims" which are without foundation *(OL, 252).* The fundamental human questions become problems, to which all answers are viewed as illusions. Modern science, try as it might, cannot eradicate the personal experiences that produce the questions. Its "lack of humility before the mysterious order of being" *(SM, 63)* has had the most powerful effect, contrary to its intention, of heightening beyond measure the human sense of mystery. The "spiritual condition of modern civilization" is, above all, characterized by loss, "the loss of metaphysical certainty . . . , of any kind of higher horizon" *(DP,* 10-11). Modern man has had the experience of "having lost the ground under his feet" *(DP, 53).*

Modern human beings, having been deprived of a properly human home or world, are readily seduced by ideology's promise of an "immediately available home" *(OL,* 129). This place claims to be one without any of the radical uncertainty and anxiety that characterizes a world which seems otherwise to be without any foundation for human existence. The attraction of the "pseudo-scientific illusion of ideology" is "the loss of the sense of the enigma of life" *(SM, 63).*

Radical uncertainty and comprehensive certainty are the misanthropic extremes that characterize a world that has lost its properly human dimensions. The question of our time, for Havel, is how to reconstitute the "natural world" *(OL, 263).* It is one which has no systematic or impersonal answer. It requires an "existential" transformation, a profound change in human self-understanding *(OL, 207).* For the answer to this key question, the Czechs and the Slovaks cannot turn to the Americans, but the Americans might turn to them.

Science, Ideology, and the West

Havel explicitly follows Solzhenitsyn in seeing the West as far more dominated by ideology than it believes. He "is taken aback by the extent to which so many Westerners are addicted to ideology, much more than we who live in a system that is ideological through and through" *(OL, 305).* He finds in the West the same "automatism" and denial of personal responsibility that he finds in post-totalitarian regimes. There is little genuine political life, because human beings seem "incapable of ... transcending concerns about their own personal survival to be proud and responsible members of a polis, making a genuine contribution to a creation of its destiny." What constitutes a polis or political life is practical responsibility, which must include what Solzhenitsyn calls civic courage or what Havel calls the horizon of highest sacrifice. Solzhenitsyn, Havel says, describes better than anyone "the illusory nature of freedom in the West," because it is "not based on personal responsibility." The result is a "chronic inability . . . to oppose violence or totalitarianism" *(OL, 208).*

The modern crisis of responsibility, then, is global. Havel explicitly follows Heidegger in defining it "as the ineptitude of humanity to come face to face with the planetary power of technology." In this view, "the post-totalitarian system built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and modern technology" is "only a caricature of modern life in general." It, as Solzhenitsyn also says, ought to serve as "a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies." One of the most impressive features of Havel's thought is his perception of the limited but real kinship

between Heidegger, his greatest philosophic influence, and Solzhenitsyn, the most courageous critic of all forms of modern systematization. Havel's expression of the view that "the post-totalitarian system is only one aspect" of "the general failure of modern humanity" is especially penetrating *(OL,* 206-08).

At times, Havel almost seems to go as far as Heidegger does, viewing the United States and the Soviet Union as metaphysically the same. But often he clearly distinguishes between societies which exhibit systematic "tendencies" and those which aim explicitly at being wholly systematic. His criticism of the West, like Solzhenitsyn's, is partial. He does not share "Reaganite . . . illusions" about the goodness of America, but he saw much more "internal freedom" and "credibility" in American than in Soviet foreign policy. The "two superpowers" appeared "so profoundly different" to Havel that he could see no merit in the peace movement's assertion of their moral equivalence *(OL,* 309). In Havel's view this moral distinction is based on the fact that the West is still animated to some extent by its premodern heritage. Havel writes of "such values as Europe has left" *(OL,* 260) and, as we have seen, he praises the continuing influence of the American founders.

Having made such distinctions, it still remains the case that one finds everywhere in the modern world "the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity." The modern impulse is the "willingness to surrender higher values" (OL, 145). This surrender must be resisted everywhere. "It is not that important," Havel says, "whether, by accident of domicile, we confront a Western manager or an Eastern bureaucrat in this very modest but globally crucial struggle against the momentum of impersonal power" *(OL,* 263). The West also needs its dissidents. As Solzhenitsyn says, what the party tried to do in the East, commerce and bureaucracy tend to do in the West.

Havel is impressed with Heidegger's view that the contemporary crisis is a "crisis of democracy." He agrees to the extent that "[t]here is no real evidence that Western democracy, that is democracy of the traditional, participatory type, can offer solutions" to the problem of

the "general inability of modern humanity to be master of our situation." According to Havel, the conclusion Heidegger reaches is that we lack a "political conception to bring things under human control." Hence, we seem to be victims of modern technology, "compelled . . . to participate in our own destruction." Heidegger exclaims "Only a God can save us now," but, of course, human beings cannot create a God just because they need one. All that can be done now is to open the way for some sort of divine return with certain "preparing experiences," or the development of "a different way of thinking . . . from what philosophy has been for centuries" *(OL,* 206-08). Such experiences, it seems, are purely intellectual. Whatever they might be, they, for Heidegger, seem not to include any moral or political action. The thinker need not take responsibility for what is beyond his control. For all practical purposes, Heidegger sees no alternative to the passivity of a victim today.

Havel agrees largely with Heidegger's analysis of the power and danger of the impersonality of technology, while rejecting his passivity or denial of practical responsibility. He cannot help but view this denial as cowardice. Against such a view, he remembers Patocka, who "used to say that the most interesting thing about responsibility is that we carry it everywhere." We cannot escape from this world into some other, imaginary one. "Living in the truth," Havel says, is "an attempt to regain control over one's sense of responsibility" in "the place ... where the Lord has set us down." It must be "clearly a moral action" *(OL, 153, 195).*

Havel says in his speech to Congress that "[f]rom time to time we say that the anonymous megamachinery we have created for ourselves no longer serves us, but rather has enslaved us, yet we still fail to do anything about it." Heidegger's view seems to be that there is nothing to be done. But, for Havel, human beings always have moral responsibility. The assertion that their destiny is wholly beyond their direction is always a lie. Heidegger's thinking, despite its anti-systematic pretensions, seems to share in the lie of ideology.

The Collapse of Ideology

Havel does not look to Western democracy for solutions to the problem of human irresponsibility in the face of modern science and technology. He looks instead to the great victory the dissidents won in 1989. It was a victory for human identity as such: "Communism was overthrown by life, by thought, by human dignity" *(SM, 5).* It was not overthrown by impersonal forces beyond human control and responsibility.

The result was "the collapse of an ideology," which ought to be the foundation, Havel contends, for "skepticism toward all ideologies." Havel calls this skepticism his own "ancient skepticism," the one he had as a dissident *(SM,* 27-28). The collapse of communist ideology showed Havel what he already knew. Any ideological "system's totalitarian character conflicts with life's own intrinsic tendency toward heterogeneity, diversity, uniqueness, autonomy-in a word, plurality." Havel knows that "life inevitably obstructs and resists a totalitarian system," because human life will always be more than "what science knows about it" *(SM, 66).* Hence, his skepticism about ideology is part of his "skepticism about utopianism," particularly "rationalistic utopianism" *(OL,* 308). Because he has a view of man's heterogeneous essence or nature, he has a view of the limits of technological determinism that Heidegger's radical historicism does not have. His view that human responsibility has a foundation in eternity both produces in him and is a product of his intellectual and moral courage.

Havel, finally, understands the collapse of ideology as the triumph of nature, especially human nature or life, over the misanthropic impositions of modern science. He says it shows "the resistance of Being and man to manipulation."[16] He also speaks of the "paradoxical" fact that "people in the age of science live with the conviction that they can improve their lives because they are able to grasp and exploit the complexity of nature and the general laws of its function." But the truth is that "it is precisely those laws which, in the end tragically catch up with them" *(OL,* 254). The modern experience is that science does not understand nature well enough to

conquer it after all. Hence, all modern man accomplished was to have "destroyed" nature and "disinherited" himself from it, and those accomplishments were far from complete *(OL, 255).* The heterogeneity of nature triumphed over scientific destruction.

Havel shares Solzhenitsyn's view that modern science gradually reveals itself to itself as an error. He says that "it is not by accident that some of the most profound discoveries of modern science have rendered the myth of objectivity surprisingly problematic." These discoveries, "via a remarkable detour, return us to the human subject and his world" *(OL, 252).* The personal experiences of conscience and responsibility turn out not to be illusions at all.

The premodern myths that articulated those experiences turn out to more true than the myth of objectivity. They consciously accounted for the irrationality and disorder that necessarily accompanies human subjectivity, and they were free from the irrationality that comes with the modern illusion that it is possible or good to eradicate completely that disorder *(OL, 285- 90).* But Havel, like Solzhenitsyn, does not harbor "antiquarian desire" to return to the premodern world of gross inequality and "incredible drudgery" (SM, 111). The rediscovery of subjectivity or the foundation of personal experience can be the basis of a humanly worthy articulation of the modern doctrine of rights. Havel writes that he is "unwilling to believe" that modern "civilization is no more than a blind alley of history and a fatal error of the human spirit." He prefers to understand it not as leading to humanity's destruction but as part of a human movement to a "postmodern" world. Like Solzhenitsyn, he says it is "probably" a "necessary phase" that will lead humanity to "some higher level" *(OL, 206).*

The postmodern task," the one that begins in view of modern science as an error, is the reconstitution of the natural world "as the true terrain of politics." Such a reconstitution aims at "returning content to human speech," by restoring meaning to fundamental personal experiences. It also aims at "making human community meaningful," by rooting it more than ideological uniformity or personal convenience *(OL, 263).*

The least that must be said is that the origination of the postmodern

age must be much less naive or more self-conscious that the premodern experience of the givenness of the natural world. Reconstitution presupposes the experience of destruction. "We must honor," Havel asserts, "with the humility of the wise the limits of the natural world" *(OL,* 267). Our wisdom is postmodern because it depends on modern experience of the futility and cruel destructiveness of human efforts to eradicate those limits. We must affirm our responsibility in view of our mortality, and hence of the invincibility of evil and human suffering (SM,16). We must also have "a certain humility and respect for the mysterious order of nature," of what necessarily eludes our comprehension and control. We must admit "that there is something in the order of Being which evidently exceeds all our competence" and to which we nonetheless experience ourselves as bound *(OL,* 268-69).

Havel's remark in his address to Congress about Jefferson's words on consent as "a simple and important act of the human experience" seem to suggest that they reflect such an experience. Havel follows them with his address's final words: "[H]istory has accelerated. I believe that once again it will be the human mind that will notice this acceleration, give it a name, and transform those words into deeds." Havel's hope seems to be that intellectuals will once again assume practical responsibility at a crucial moment.'[$]

The collapse of the modern way of viewing the world, with the rapid historical changes it produces, can make possible a postmodern project, an existential transformation, a new birth of the human spirit. There is, of course, no way to predict or ensure such a project's success, because history, as a part of human subjectivity eludes complete human comprehension or control. But its success or failure is not a simple reflection of its truth or falsity, or especially its worth as a manifestation of the human spirit, because human existence is not, most fundamentally, historical. Human responsibility, properly understood, is assumed in light both of the truth about human finitude, which includes the contingency and disorder of all historical existence, and the awareness of human beings of their relationship to eternity.

Responsibility and Conscience

Havel told Congress that "we still don't know how to put morality ahead of politics, science, and economics." That is because we still do not understand "that the backbone to all our actions-if they are to be moral-is responsibility." Responsibility, finally, is to "the order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be judged."

What Havel means by "the order of Being" is obscure. He holds, contrary to Heidegger and other historicists, that one's particular action has eternal significance. Human beings are open enough to Being's order to understand it as more than merely mysterious. We know that "we touch on eternity in a strange way," that "the world is more than a cluster of improbable accidents" *(DP, 189).* Our experience of Being is "veiled," but it is still clear enough to give us what might "be understood as faith" in an "incorruptible voice calling us to responsibility" (LO, 360). Our awareness of ourselves as part of an ordered whole, and not the highest part, is sufficient to give moral order and direction to our lives.

"The interpreter or mediator between us and this higher authority," Havel says to Congress, "is what is traditionally referred to as conscience." Conscientious experience is reliable enough to be the foundation of the acceptance of "the burden of responsibility." It is an experience that human beings, even "intellectuals," cannot truthfully resist.

Havel elsewhere emphasizes that "responsibility is always `higher responsibility.- It must have a "metaphysical grounding" in our "conscious or subconscious certainty that one death ends nothing, because everything is forever being recorded and evaluated by someone else." This experience of "the secret order of the cosmos" is what "believers call God," but Havel calls it "the memory of Being" *(SM 5-6).* In Havel's view, there is no evidence that there is a God in the personal sense of the Christians, and he has no faith in such a God *(DP, 188-90).* Nevertheless, responsibility is "explicable only as an expression of the silent assumption that we are observed `from above,' that everything is visible, nothing is forgotten." Havel's

personal experience is that "earthly time has no power to wipe away anything" *(SM 5-6).* The need for the assumption is clear, but how Being can observe without being personal is not.

Havel acknowledges that this experience seems vague in its subjective or personal dimension, but he asks that we trust him and it. We cannot help but wonder if it is sufficient to reconstitute the natural world. Is it possible for a human being today who has not shared the extraordinary character of Havel's dissident experience to share his perception that there is an eternal foundation for moral responsibility? For a Christian, Havel's experience would seem to be too subjective, and his thinking points to the conclusion that human liberty and responsibility really do depend upon the existence of a personal God. According to the American postmodern thinker Richard Rorty, the lesson of the collapse of ideology is that there is no foundation at all. Rorty can, in a way, admire but not really take seriously Havel's moral seriousness.'

Havel's response to this anti- or nonfoundationalism is that it is actually modern. Its nihilism has motivated the ideological impositions that characterized modern science from its beginning. Havel would also readily see what Rorty himself does, the kinship between Rorty's alleged postmodernism and Dewey's pragmatism. Both celebrate, finally, the loss of identity in the banality of everydayness.

For confirmation of the genuine existence of Havel's experience, we must, he says, trust "the voice of conscience" more "than our abstract speculations," or let conscience limit and direct our speculations (OL, 263).'The foundation of human liberty and human rights is "the autonomous, integral and human I'," that which makes "us responsible for ourselves because we are bound to something higher" (OL, 253). The experience of that responsibility, on which we can make sense of the horizon of highest sacrifice, is more natural to human beings than its denial, which is a misanthropic abstraction from or denial of personal experience.

On the basis of his personal experience and that of other dissidents, and even before the revolution of 1989, Havel expressed great confidence in the possibility of the reconstitution of moral and political life. "I see," Havel asserts, "a renewed focus of politics on

real people as something far more profound than merely returning to the everyday mechanism of Western (or, if you like) bourgeois democracy" *(OL, 209).* The return of political life opposes both bourgeois and socialist tendencies toward systematic or impersonal solutions. It opposes the lack of cultivation of responsibility and civility that characterizes the modern State as such *(SM, 17-21).*

Havel's precise contention is that the beginning of this return actually occurred in post-totalitarian societies. There, he observed, "political life in the more traditional sense had been eliminated." There was no opportunity for truthful public or political expression. Political discourse was replaced by "ideological ritual" *(OL,* 158). Nonetheless, political life had not quite disappeared altogether.

The dissidents, Havel says, were those who did "not abandon polities as a vocation," because they "in one way or another" strove "to think independently." They, in their shared sense of personal responsibility, formed a community, "a parallel polis," as "part of their attempt to live within the truth." This "parallel polis" was not some city in speech or escape from political responsibility, but "an act of deepening one's responsibility for the whole" as a prelude to political organization *(OL,* 158, *196).* It was a prelude to "actions" that "simply articulate" one's "dignity as a citizen, regardless of the cost" *(OL, 320).* Because membership in this parallel polis was "potentially accessible to everyone," it foreshadowed a "general solution" to the problem of ideology *(OL,* 192-93). It was also the basis of a humanly worthy egalitarianism *(OL,* 171). *All* human beings are capable of "inner emancipation" through conscientious responsibility, and hence of securing their rights *(OL,* 177).

Even before 1989, the dissidents showed that politics need not be Machiavellianism. Political success need not depend on liberating reason from "the human being as such" *(OL,* 251) For Havel, the example of Solzhenitsyn in particular showed that "it is still possible to oppose personal experiences and the natural world to the 'innocent' power and to unmask its guilt." Hence, "[lit is becoming evident that truth and morality can provide a new starting point for politics and can, even today, have an undeniable political power." The natural world can be reconstituted because it is becoming clear "that

wholly personal categories like good and evil still have their unambiguous content." The "moral ground" of the dissident's "sense of responsibility" *(OL,* 270), President Havel asserts, can become the foundation of his nation's political life, even its foreign policy *(SM,* 80-101).

Havel, at one point, calls the political order based on the personal experience of the dissident "post-democratic." It is to be rooted in "small communities" of human proportions rather than in the institutions of mass democracy *(DP,* 16-17; *SM,* 103; *OL,* 173, 211-12). It is to include the institutions of the free market, because private property is the foundation of personal responsibility and pride in one's work. Because "everything belongs to someone," "someone is responsible for everything" *(SM,* 62). The free market is indispensable for the personal cultivation of virtue, or the abandonment "of control and discipline . . . in favor of self-control and self-discipline" *(OL,* 211).

The "free market" is the most "natural" form of economic relationship. It is precisely because it is so natural or "down-to-earth" that Havel does not regard it as either an ideology or a philosophy. It surely does not "contain the meaning of human life" *(SM,* 64-65). It is only part, and by no means the highest part, of the plurality or diversity which is that life *(OL,* 341). Most important, for Havel, is "the general cultural level of everyday life," its ability to transcend to some extent the leveling uniformity of everydayness *(SM,* 14). It is the task of political leaders to elevate that cultural level through their rhetoric, example, and sound public policy *(SM,* 1-20).

The question Havel cannot help but raise is whether the "genuine community" that is the heart of the dissident experience can sustain itself after the collapse of ideology. It certainly makes sense to wonder whether the "dissident mood" will "dissipate" with the removal of the "common threat" *(OL,* 213). The horizon of highest sacrifice will recede as the Czech and Slovaks (or, as it now seems, the Czechs) successfully adopt the economic and political institutions of liberal democracy. What is to keep the impersonality of everydayness so prevalent in the West from triumphing among them? Does Havel point to the conclusion that there was more freedom, especially

freedom of thought and action, in the post-totalitarian Czechoslovakia than there can be in today's Czech Republic?

Havel, in his most recent book, seems to rely too much on his personal leadership, on his ability to be a sort of philosopher-president, ennobling his people through his ethical discourses on responsibility and conscience. He says that the people say they want to hear that there is a foundation for personal morality. He suggests that they want to hear it from him because his personal integrity is a manifestation of the proper relationship between word and deed. They say they "want to hear that decency and courage make sense" *(SM, 9).*

Havel writes eloquently and rather classically of the need for political leaders to provide for moral cultivation, to set the tone for civility and "good taste." Politics, he reminds us, is "largely a matter of form" *(SM,* 13). He adds that manifestations of practical responsibility come readily to him, and they can lead to political success. There is no need for the dissident to compromise his high standards when he comes to power. Havel can rule well, as does the philosopher-king, precisely because he has "no longing or love for power," but only to be responsible. He is, in that sense, the model for all citizens *(SM, 8).* His moral integrity extends further than that of either Plato's philosopher-king and most of the tradition of political philosophy. He observes that, in his experience, "it is simply not true that a politician must lie or intrigue" *(SM, 10).* His extraordinary experience opposes radically the "everyday" view of political success *(SM, 8).*

It is a tribute to remarkable example that he can say all this so persuasively and in a way that is strikingly free from moralistic hypocrisy. But, apart from other considerations, will Havel's successors share his remarkable personal experiences and his ability to articulate them? As Havel suggests in his speech to Congress, only extraordinary or "founding" circumstances of some sort or another bring individuals of both practical and intellectual excellence to power. One suspects that only the most extraordinary demands of resistance to ideology could produce individuals such as Havel and Solzhenitsyn.

Havel hopes that the Czechs, as a result of their remarkable

history, can begome a model for social and political order that transcends the illusions of "the entire modern age." "[I]deologies," he says, "will be replaced by ideas" *(SM,* 128). His hope for existential transformation based on his people's human strength through suffering is at least similar to Solzhenitsyn's for his. But, for now, it seems that the illusions of modern science still dominate most of the world. President Havel could not help but see the propensity of his people already to be attracted to new ideologies to fill the "void" left by the discrediting of Marxism *(SM,* 2). It seems unlikely that the Czechs, in the long run, can be the exception to any Western rule. Nonetheless, Havel, extraordinary even among founders for the close connection he finds between philosophical reflection and practical responsibility, remains to inspire us beyond everydayness to some extent, sometimes.

We Americans can turn to Havel and Solzhenitsyn for a candid and comprehensive account of our shortcomings. Our thought and action really are largely enslaved to the everydayness of a world dominated by technology. Our language is weak in making moral distinctions, and we do not experience strongly or clearly the horizon of highest sacrifice as genuine or good. Because we are not particularly courageous, we are personally irresponsible and find it difficult to cultivate voluntary self-restraint. We prefer impersonal theories such as Marxism and other forms of social and economic determinism to the truth about human existence. Because we do not experience ourselves strongly as bound to something higher, we find it difficult to resist materialistic determination in both theory and practice.

We do not have the practical responsibility required to impel us toward genuinely political life. The result is that we are weak spiritually, unhappy and anxious in the midst of our prosperity. We long, whether we acknowledge it or not, for a world constituted by the distinctions between good and evil and man and God. But that unsatisfied longing does not reduce us to victims of an atheistic, meaningless time, as Heidegger seems to say. Our personal experiences, if truth be told, still can be the foundation of responsibility. The struggle that constitutes human existence and makes possible the "natural world" still exists within us all. That struggle is the

foundation for a humanly worthy understanding of liberty.

Peter Augustine Lawler
Berry College

NOTES

1. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

2. I defend this view of Tocqueville in my *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).

3. For Solzhenitsyn's partial criticism, see "A World Split Apart," *East and West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 39-74. All references to Solzhenitsyn in the text are from this source.

4. The comparison between Solzhenitsyn and Havel presented here is just an introduction. Much more needs to be said about their similar accounts of ideology, conscientious or inner freedom, and the literary or poetic defense of the truth. For a fine account of Solzhenitsyn's views on these and other issues, see James F. Pontuso, *Solzhenitsyn's Political Thought* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990).

5. See Solzhenitsyn's *Rebuilding Russia* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), which should be compared with Havel's *Summer Meditations*. Each book is concerned with turning one's own nation into home fit for human beings.

6. See the use of Havel's view of post-totalitarianism in Fukuyama, p. 33.

7. Havel's memoir of Patocka is "Last Conversation," *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia* (London: Allan and Urwin, 1977). I do not address the question here of the extent to which Havel is indebted to Patocka's unusual and fascinating opinions on controversial philosophical issues. Havel's most important direct debt, it seems to me, is his view of the "natural world" as the domain of good and evil. Patocka, in turn, seems to have combined elements from Husserl, Heidegger, and even Plato. See the essays of Patocka gathered together in Erazum Kohak, *Jan Patocka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977),

especially pp. 207-71.

Two interesting beginnings in determining the relationship between Havel and Patocka are Richard Rorty, "The Seer of Prague," *The New Republic* (July 1, 1991), 55-60 and Jean Betka Elshtain, "A Man for Our Season: Havel on Freedom and Responsibility," *Perspectives on Political Science,* forthcoming.

8. A useful introduction to Havel's use of Heidegger is Aviezer Tucker, "Vāclav Havel's Heideggerianism," *Telos* 85 (Fall, 1990), 63-78. Tucker also calls attention to Havel's echoing of some of Solzhenitsyn's criticisms of the contemporary West. His intention is to discredit Havel by revealing some of his anti-liberal sources. He does not make the mistake, however, of failing to note that Havel's moral seriousness separates him from Heidegger. It seems to me that any criticism shared by Havel, Heidegger, and Solzhenitsyn is worthy of the most serious consideration by Americans.

9. I refer, of course, to *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). This connection between Bloom and Heidegger is made by Michael Zuckert, "Two Cheers (At Least) for Allan Bloom," *Essays on the Closing of the American Mind,* ed. Robert L. Stone (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1989), 75.

10. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "Dewey, All-Out Democrat," *Times Literary Supplement* (January 24, 1992), 26.

11. On the theme of temptation, or "the Faustian theme," in Havel's recent plays see *DP,* 66-68. Havel suggests that his most profound theme is his own temptation.

12. Rorty suggests how this account of human dignity and transcendence is indebted to Patocka on p. 36.

13. For Havel's account of his own, paradoxical nature, see *DP,* 199-206 and, of course, *Letters to Olga.*

14. This aspect of Havel's account of ideology is nicely highlighted in greater detail in Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 133-47.

15. Havel's anti-dogmatism or transcendence of each of the various forms of contemporary ideology is the theme of Elshtain's essay.

16. Vāclav Havel, "The End of the Modern Era," *The New York Times* op ed (March 1, 1992), 15.

17. Ibid.: "Sooner or later politics will be faced with the task of finding a postmodern face." A politician must become a person again. Such a person must have "individual spirituality, first-hand personal insight into things; the courage to be himself and go the way his conscience points, humility in the face of the mysterious order of Being, confidence in his natural direction and, above all, trust in his own subjectivity." Notice the mixture of humility, confidence, and trust.

18. This conclusion was suggested to me by Rorty, p. *36.* Rorty contends that Havel's view of the openness of the future and of the indeterminacy of the human condition, in part, can be traced to Patocka's "negative Platonism." Patocka held that Plato, contrary to the view of Heidegger, had no positive, metaphysical doctrine. Rorty opposes this "philosophy purified of metaphysical claims" to the dogmatism of Leo Strauss and his students (p. *37)* and holds, contrary to Havel, that it ought to oppose all forms of "moral realism." It seems to me, contrary to Rorty, that Patocka's Plato is much closer to Strauss's than to Heidegger's. Strauss and Patocka both view Plato as an anti-dogmatist, as an opponent of the all attempts to eradicate human uncertainty. To speak abstractly, Strauss and Havel seem to agree that philosophical anti-dogmatism is required to allow moral realism, or the simple human experiences of good and evil, to come into their own. I leave these assertions, for now, as mere assertions, as food for thought for those who might be interested.

19. What Rorty says about Patocka he also means to apply to Havel. His "conscience led him to do the right thing, but he did not supply good philosophical reasons for doing what he did" (p. *37).*