

Havel and Personal Responsibility

"I wasn't really prepared for how difficult it has been for the literary climate to come to terms with something as natural as the attempt to speak without using established phraseological evasions; for how this climate--still dominated by evasive thinking--has suddenly begun to cling to these evasions; for how hard it is to come to terms with someone actually enjoying the luxury of openness; and for the irritation, the sour looks, the snide remarks evoked by something so down to earth as a group of people attempting to be true to themselves, without having to cut a deal with the literary climate."—"On Evasive Thinking" (1965)

"Cowardly policies encourage cowardice in society; courageous policies stimulate people's courage. Our nations have a capacity for both cowardly and courageous behavior, for demonstrating holy zeal or selfish indifference. Czechs and Slovaks are capable of struggling heroically or shamelessly denouncing their neighbors. Which of these propensities prevails at a given moment, both in society and in individuals, largely depends on what situation the political elite has created, the choices it places before the people, the qualities it encourages in them."—Letter to Alexander Dubček" (1969)

"The system's totalitarian character conflicts with life's own intrinsic tendency towards heterogeneity, diversity, uniqueness, autonomy—in a word, toward plurality. This is why life inevitably obstructs and resists a totalitarian system."—"Farce, Reformability, and the Future of the World" (1987)

Václav Havel (1936-2011) insisted that he never had a consistent or thought-through worldview, though he clearly owed a debt to the philosophies of Martin Heidegger, Jan Patočka, and French existentialism, as well as to the traditional politics of the individual. Havel often made reference to the "order" or "horizon of Being" and to why this engenders in us personal responsibility and moral seriousness. He also looked to a sense of "togetherness," if not holism, in the nature of things, and often observed that life reveals itself in the power of an evolving, energetic universe, one that totalitarian systems are at pains to try and repress for long. Havel avoided using the word "God" for Being. If he believed in a God, it was not a personal one to whom one could pray, worship, or show love, but he assigned to the totality of existence a greatness that mirrors what reserve for God, and he could admit that at times Being turns a positive face to us that is received personally.

Likewise, the absolute horizon of Being requires each of us personal responsibility, and this includes a self-reflective awareness of actions and limitations, as well as a faithful response to our failures. This is "living in the truth." Truth, for Havel, calls for commitment, a personal set of lived convictions, a unity of words and deeds. Our human experiences of mystical elevation, political and moral conscience, human empathy, and shameful failure are all ways we recognize that Being has about it more than the mundane. Our failure, in particular, forces us to confront ourselves and asks is to remain committed to what we believe to be true. Respect for each human being's unique dignity and basic rights is built upon the human ability to transcend oneself by a kind of identification with Being's fullness. Thus, his political vision was focused on empowering personal responsibility and dignity within a creative culture. At the same time, because of his experience of communism, he was deeply distrustful of any utopian schema for human life and culture, charging that such inevitably led to justifying all kinds of evil and repression.

Discussion Questions

"The Trial" (1976) [*Open Letters* 102-108]

1. What does Havel see as emblematic of the trial of The Plastic People of the Universe?
2. Why did he and others see it as an important "illumination of the world" even knowing the outcome was already predetermined?
3. How did it paradoxically create a kind of community among some of those present?

“Article 202” (1978) [*Open Letters* 109-116]

4. Why does Havel tell the story about his losing his temper and kicking the door at the bar?
5. What makes humiliation a key to the problem?
6. What did an organization like VONS hope to do in such circumstances?

“Two Letters from Prison” (1983) [*Open Letters* 230-236]

7. On what grounds does Havel judge the moral and metaphysical act as a personal one and the fanatically and despairing one as dependent upon organizations and ideologies? Do you agree?
8. What makes an “orientation toward Being” a necessary element of moral action?
9. What makes the need for “doing” a mistake in many circumstances? (234)
10. How can silence be an extraordinarily powerful thing?

“Thriller” (1984) [*Open Letters* 285-290]

11. Why does Havel refuse to see the modern civilization as “a blind alley of history” and yet one that dangerously is denying dark metaphysical powers?
12. What makes this modern civilization surprised by the “irrational” actions of others?

“Stories and Totalitarianism” (1987/8) [*Open Letters* 328-350]

13. Why is totalitarianism built on the destruction of story? (329-330)
14. How does all story contain plurality and mystery? (332-334) Do you agree?
15. How does a single reductive interpretation seek to rob us of history? (335-336)
16. How are personal stories and locality intertwined? (338ff.)
17. Why do humans need to be creative and not just productive?
18. Why does totalitarianism pressure even private stories to become generic? (344ff.)