

Vaclav Havel: Between Modernity and Responsibility

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Vaclav Havel once said that "the role of the intellectual, among other things, is to foresee like Cassandra, various threats, horrors and catastrophes."¹ [1] He embraced the role of diviner, because, like Arendt, he thought that we cannot allow the world to repeat the horrors of totalitarianism. Having lived through it, against all odds, he acquired that conscious responsibility of the mindful survivor to understand, explain, and prevent what he had experienced. Havel thus embarked on a difficult quest: to rid politics of evil, to shake the impersonal character of bureaucracy, and to bring personal responsibility and morality back into the public realm. He was often aware that his call for morality in politics might sound quixotic, obscure, and even ridiculous to the ears of modern individuals who have lost the culture of higher horizons and transcendent values. However, he frequently insisted that "the risk of ridicule, however, is insufficient reason for me to remain silent about something I am constantly persuaded is true❖that one of the most basic human experiences, one that is genuinely universal and unites or, more precisely, could unite all of humanity, is the experience of transcendence in the broadest sense of the word."² [2] This experience of transcendence is, fundamentally, our ability to make sense of our life, to qualify it as good or bad, to understand how we relate with others. Just like we share a sense of space and

1 [1] Speech delivered at Stanford University , September 29, 1994 , *The Art of the Impossible*, 173.

2 [2] Ibid.

time, we also share a sense of inherent meaning in our own existence, which allows us to go on living. Havel calls this inner sense of purpose "the memory of Being❖in which everything is constantly recorded"3 [3] and which seems to hold those "supra-personal authorities or principles that not only transcend man but to which he constantly relates, and which are the sole, final explanation of a phenomenon as particular as *human responsibility*."4 [4]

Fundamentally, Havel 's effort to emphasize the significance of responsibility can be characterized as a work of retrieval: the retrieval of higher value from the "pre-modern past," a past where they still had meaning. Havel , like Heidegger and Arendt, is convinced that modern society is in a state of crisis. The metaphysical uncertainty of modern life leads to the pitiful inability of humanity to master the technological, bureaucratic, anxiety-ridden world it created. "We have no idea, and no faith" to save us, and all we do is "look on helplessly as that coldly functioning machine we have created inevitably engulfs us."5 [5] The epitome of this world of despair and obscurity is Eastern European totalitarianism and Havel starts his analysis of modernity from the wretched bottom of totalitarian oppression. But there would be little left to say about Havel if he had not discovered the saving grace of this miserable crisis. In a world that ceases to "respect any so-called higher metaphysical values ❖ the Absolute, something higher than themselves, something mysterious"6 [6] the only way to overcome the deadening effects of modern life is to live responsibly, "taking charge of our fates and refusing to accept that ❖they' -

3 [3] Ibid.

4 [4] Ibid, italics added.

5 [5] Havel , "The Power of the Powerless," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965 ❖ 1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 206.

6 [6] Havel , *Letters to Olga*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 268.

some distant, unknown others, control our destinies."7 [7] In the following essay I will explain why I believe that the concept of responsibility is the crux of Havel 's political philosophy: it is the basis of his understanding of identity, it is the motor behind his theory of resistance, and it is, ultimately, the essence of political life. "The secret of man is the secret of his responsibility,"8 [8] Havel says, and what he means is that both private and public life, to be free, just, and meaningful, have to be structured around a "thick" notion of individual responsibility.

Havel and Arendt: A Dialogue

The issue of responsibility in Havel 's work is difficult to tackle because it is hard to discuss the re-gaining of responsibility without first explaining what exacted its loss. I will first try to frame the loss of responsibility and then tease out the conditions of its reconstruction. In order to clarify my interpretation of Havel 's points, I will make copious use of Arendt, whose perspective I find closest to Havel . I also find it intriguing to use Arendt since at the time Havel wrote most of the texts I use, he had not read Arendt, yet he seems to be engaged in a direct dialogue with her. It is perhaps not surprising that the two greatest commentators of the phenomenon of totalitarianism, in all its forms, seem to operate with the same categories, but, many times, they do not reach the same conclusions. The methods I will use throughout this paper can perhaps be best described as a "dialogue" between Havel and Arendt, while trying to clarify Havel 's (rather than Arendt's) point of view.

7 [7] James Pontuso, *Vaclav Havel: Civic Responsibility in the Postmodern Age* (Oxford : Rowan & Littlefield, 2004), 31

8 [8] Havel , *Letters to Olga*, 371.

In using Arendt I have to settle a confusing point that I find difficult to formulate, simply because Arendt herself does not offer clarifications. The potential confusion has to do with the inconsistent way Arendt portrays totalitarianism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* compared to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. As Jerome Kohn argues: "from the 1940's at least until Stalin's death in 1953 the leitmotif of Arendt's work was what she called the 'radical' or 'absolute' evil of totalitarianism." But what Arendt herself had not realized before encountering Eichmann's inability to reflect on what he had done, which she distinguished from stupidity, is that such evil need not be rooted in an ideology of any kind."⁹ [9] She used this reflection on Eichmann's mindless wickedness to coin her famous phrase, "the banality of evil." I do not aim to solve the contradiction in this paper but any comparison that involves Arendt on the subject of totalitarianism is difficult to pursue since we cannot have it both ways: totalitarianism cannot be both "radical" and "banal." Consequently, I need to specify that I will discuss Arendt's view in Eichmann according to my interpretation that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a glimpse at a new kind of totalitarianism, the kind that would have risen if Nazi Germany had lasted. The zealots would have been replaced by Eichmanns and totalitarianism would have transitioned completely from the revolutionary kind that Arendt traces in *The Origins* to the faceless kind that Havel sees, mature and full fledged, in Eastern Europe .

In essence, I believe that Havel picked up where Arendt left off: his totalitarianism is populated exclusively by Eichmanns, no zealots left to sing the praises of the regime. In sum, Havel makes a clear distinction between early (Stalinist and Nazi) totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism, the phenomenon that he associates with Eastern Europe beginning with the 1960's.

⁹ [9] Jerome Kohn's Introduction to Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York : Schoken Books, 2003), xix - xx

Post-totalitarianism is in Havel 's eyes a distinct, novel brand of totalitarianism characteristic of the late Soviet Union and the Eastern-European regimes of until 1989. Havel raises the issue of responsibility on the background of post-totalitarianism, and he is fully aware that the misery of oppression brought forth with clarity the strong necessity to recover responsibility as the universal essence of human life. He encapsulates his experience in this line: "to see the stars one must sink to the bottom of a well."

Lies and post-totalitarianism

What made Eastern European totalitarianism so distinctive was its penchant for lies. The lie was a political force, it was institutionalized, disseminated, indoctrinated, developed and taught, all on the shoulders of a massive bureaucracy dedicated to one thing: to further increase the power of lies. Some would say that this story sounds familiar; after all, Arendt has always insisted on how lying in politics is a mark of totalitarianism, well before Eastern Europe experienced it. The Nazis lied just as much, and their ferocity in supporting lies rivaled any Eastern European apparatchiks. But the difference between the early totalitarianism that Arendt is famous for describing in *Origins*, and what Havel calls the "post-totalitarianism" of Eastern Europe , is the degree of belief in the system's lies. Whereas Fascism, and Stalinism for that matter, was rife with calls for voluntarism, dedication and enthusiasm for the cause, post-totalitarian power "only" required automatic performance of the ritual: "we are no longer governed by fanatics, revolutionaries, or ideological zealots. The country is administered by faceless bureaucrats who

profess adherence to a revolutionary ideology, but look out only for themselves, and no longer believe in anything."10 [10]

This volte-face of post-totalitarianism has a historical reason. Trailing further and further away from the enthusiastic beginnings of communism, more and more burdened by murders, abuses and lies, the post-totalitarian power was forced to give up a now futile exercise in convincing. Instead, it was forced to blindly embrace its own doctrine. The rigidity of the system increased until no more space was left for any personal opinion let alone ideological debate. Post-totalitarianism emerged as the bastion of the automaton over the revolutionary, of the empty ritual over principled action. Thus, "the fanatic whose unpredictable zeal for the 'higher cause' might threaten this automatic process has been replaced by the bureaucratic pedant whose reliable lack of idea makes him an ideal guardian of late totalitarianism's vacuous continuity."11 [11] The key in post-totalitarianism is hence a change in the function of ideology, from a tool of persuasion into a ritualistic code of submissiveness. Post-totalitarian ideology is form without essence, a philosophical shadow of its former Stalinist self.

As Ivan Volgyes argued, " the most significant role of ideology in Eastern Europe lies in its communicative nature: it is a primary vocabulary through which everything is expressed."12 [12] People have to learn the right things to say for the right circumstance, and matching the slogan to the situation is of paramount importance. The particular meaning of ideological phrases is of no import, while learning what the regime wants to hear is vital. This is what Volgyes characterizes

10 [10] Havel , "Stories and Totalitarianism," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965 - 1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 334

11 [11] Ibid, p.335.

12 [12] Ivan Volgyes, *Politics in Eastern Europe* (Homewood, Ill: Dorsey Press, March 1986), 108

as the descriptive function of Eastern European communist ideology. Whereas early totalitarian ideology was prescriptive, that is, it was "setting out a blueprint for what future communist society was to be," late totalitarian ideology was simply a "descriptive theory that would be used to justify any action the party deemed necessary to maintain power."¹³ [13] The key to this transformation is that ideology becomes devoid of fixed meanings, therefore, flexible to be manipulated by the powers that be. The first signs of economic and political breakdown were tackled by the introduction of an ideological smokescreen meant to absolve the party of any accountability for these failures. The ideological overhaul helped post - totalitarian power to twist its way out of responsibility, in any situation. The result of this conversion was the construction of a monumental system of lies in which little corresponds to reality:

Government by bureaucracy is called popular government; the working class is enslaved in the name of the working class; the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his ultimate liberation; the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom; farcical elections become the highest form of democracy; banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views; military occupation becomes fraternal assistance. Because the regime is captive in its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present and it falsifies the future.¹⁴ [14]

Right becomes wrong and the reverse, the innocent become guilty and the guilty innocent. The social and political compass is reset to spin to the tune of the system. The introduction of this ethos of lies has a devastating effect: the loss of the moral compass of individuals. Going through life, job or politics without knowing whether you are "right" or "wrong," guilty" or "innocent," or rather changing from guilty to innocent at the mere whim of the system, creates an atmosphere of supreme insecurity. Disarmed of his capacity to tell between right and wrong, the individual is left

¹³ [13] Ibid, 109.

¹⁴ [14] Havel , *The Power of the Powerless*, 218

to struggle with a world of lies. Helplessness and apathy "cripple the will to live one's life."15 [15] We need little imagination, Havel says, to realize that living within a lie leads only to the "breakdown of all criteria of decency, and the widespread destruction of confidence in the meaning of values such as truth♦sincerity, altruism, dignity and honor. Amidst a demoralization ♦in depth,' stemming from the loss of hope and the loss of the belief that life has a meaning, life must sink to a biological, vegetable level."16 [16] This is the automatism and thoughtlessness that allows for post-totalitarian oppression to thrive.

This logic is reminiscent of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Writing *Eichmann*, Arendt was surprised, like Havel , with the human capacity to suspend reason and unquestioningly accept the logic of a regime. She too believed that this was the mark of a crisis in morality that is hard to explain and even harder to understand. She coined the phrase "banality of evil" to point out this shocking new face of oppression that "contradicts our theories concerning evil."(p18 RJ) It is useful to point out once more that Eichmann represents a change in Arendt's perspective on totalitarianism. In her earlier work, most notably "The Origins of Totalitarianism," Arendt discusses what she calls the "radical" or "absolute" evil of totalitarianism and she insists that because of its radical character such evil cannot survive long, it is fated to fall as meteorically as it appeared. In *Eichmann*, for the first time, she gets a glimpse at a different kind of evil, the kind that can endure and "could spread limitlessly across the earth."17 [17] This portrait of evil has a

15 [15] Havel , *Stories and Totalitarianism*, 345

16 [16] Havel, " Dear Dr. Husak," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965 ♦ 1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 62

17 [17] Jerome Kohn's Introduction to Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, xx

lot more in common with the advanced totalitarianism Havel describes and can shed better light on it.

Thinking and responsibility

*"No wicked heart is necessary to cause great evil."*¹⁸ [18]

The parallel between Arendt and Havel is striking because they both seek to understand the significance of people's inability or refusal to think about the world they live in. Thoughtlessness seems to emerge as the greatest plight of modernity and the main accessory to totalitarianism (especially, in Havel's view, post-totalitarianism). The conclusion they both reach about the refusal to critically engage the world is that it leads to irresponsible behavior. That is not to say that those who do not think are not responsible for their actions, on the contrary, but that their actions are erratic, purposeless, automatic, immoral, and most of the time unjust, in one word, irresponsible. Where thinking stops, evil begins. The suspension of thinking, and hence the deferral of responsibility, can only make space for limitless evil because there is no basis to reason and act against it.

Both Arendt and Havel labor to understand why the behavior "not of our enemies but of our friends"¹⁹ [19] changed so drastically. Yet, "if we agree that those who did serve on whatever level and in whatever capacity were not simply monsters, what was it that made them behave as they did?"²⁰ [20] One possible answer is human nature. "Individuals can be alienated

¹⁸ [18] Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York : Schocken Books, 2003), 164

¹⁹ [19] Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York : Schocken Books, 2003), 24.

²⁰ [20] Ibid, 43.

from themselves only because there is something in them to alienate,"²¹ [21] Havel says, but it does not follow that human beings are essentially bad. We have within us, simultaneously, clashing potentialities. We can be both good or bad, moral or vitiated, heroes or cowards, executioners or victims. Our telos is nurtured and revealed by the environment we live in, through the complex interactions we have with both society and state. It is thus the dubious merit of post-totalitarianism to have brought forth those human traits that are worst. We are selfish, hypocritical, indifferent, cowardly, afraid and apathetic because we live in a system that, like never before in history, has labored to bribe, demean and anesthetize its citizens. The evil, obscure side of human nature prevailed.

There is also the possibility that widespread fear, commits the individual to acts he would never otherwise perform. There is a difference to be made between the fear under early and late (or post-) totalitarianism. In early (Nazi or Stalinist) totalitarianism fear is the result of open, cruel displays of brute force. In early totalitarianism, terror reigns supreme. People are deported, executed, show trials are staged, opposers are publicly stripped of their dignity and held as an example for all to see. This fervor of public punishment is the mark of a system that still strives to garner the devotion of its followers (many or few).

Post-totalitarianism, the successor of a failed call for zealotry and blind dedication, relies much less on enthusiasm and a lot more on a bureaucracy of threat. Fear in post-totalitarianism has a "relative" value: "it is not so much what someone objectively losses, as the subjective importance it has for him" ♦ Thus, if a person today is afraid, say, of losing the chance of working in his own field, this may be a fear equally strong, and productive of the same reactions, as if ♦ in another historical context ♦ he had been threatened with the confiscation of his property. Indeed,

²¹ [21] Havel , "The Power of the Powerless," 148

the technique of existential pressure is, in a sense, more universal."²² [22] Havel argues that it is a tendency of human nature to crave normalcy. A quiet life that allows one to be preoccupied more with home, family and themselves is something we all seem to desire. The constant threat of an oppressive system puts us under tremendous duress. Since we all have something to lose, our job, our ability to work in our field, to live in the town we are from, to visit our friends and family, or the possibility of sending our children to university, we cannot help but be constantly afraid of losing something. The normalcy of our life is lost in fear. Havel argues that without something or somebody to help us (and it is the predicament of modernity that we are left with little to rely on) we are not able to cope with this stress. It is as if when we are too afraid for too long we cannot afford to be afraid anymore, and we construct a parallel universe of falsities that allows us to live "as if" we were unafraid. Under these conditions it seems to us that we either stop being afraid or we die. But Havel believes that taking the argument this far leads to a fallacy ♦ the choice is not that we either stop being afraid or we are unable to go on living, and that there are other options, like the option to behave morally.²³ [23] Arendt also spots this fallacy when she argues that there seems to be a tendency to believe that "none of us could be trusted or even be expected to be trustworthy when the chips are down, that to be tempted and to be forced are almost the same."²⁴ [24] Arendt discovers the error of this logic in the words of Mary McCarthy: "If somebody points a gun at you and says, ♦Kill your friend or I will kill you,' he is *tempting* you that is all."²⁵ [25]

²² [22] Havel, "Dear Dr. Husak," 54

²³ [23] I will discuss the way Havel presents this option in detail below.

²⁴ [24] Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," 18.

²⁵ [25] Ibid.

The option of not acting is still on the table as the only moral option. So we are left again with the question why did people succumb to such a grotesque temptation en masse?²⁶ [26]

It appears as if we have come full circle to the breakdown in judgment that I foreshadowed above, for it seems to be this inability to think that renders us irresponsible and immoral peons in the great evils of humanity. Of course, it is the ultimate aim of post-totalitarianism to stifle the web of thought by suppressing the truths that make it possible. And, Havel argues, such a confusing moral climate breeds a fundamental indifference to what happens around one's self: "it is as though people had lost faith in future, in the possibility of setting public affairs straight, in the meaning of a struggle for truth and justice. They shrug off anything that goes beyond their everyday, routine concern for their own livelihood; they seek ways of escape; they succumb to apathy, to indifference toward suprapersonal values and their fellow men."²⁷ [27] This climate of indifference has much in common with the suspension of thought Arendt noticed in Eichmann who had a "curious, quite authentic inability to think."²⁸ [28] (Beatty 59). Indifference and automatic behavior leads man into "the rut of totalitarian thought, where he is not his own and where he surrenders his own reason and conscience."²⁹ [29] (J.B. Elshtain 120) Like Eichman who "had not the slightest difficulty in accepting an entirely new set of rules," the post-totalitarian individual,³⁰ [30] absorbs thoughtlessly the ready-made answers offered by the system. This

²⁶ [26] And there is no doubt that this general acquiescence at the least and participation at the worst is blamed by both Arendt and Havel for the horrors of the Holocaust and forty five years of Eastern European oppression.

²⁷ [27] Havel, "Dear Dr. Husak," 57.

²⁸ [28] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 417.

²⁹ [29] Vaclav Havel, "Politics and Conscience," in *Living in Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 151.

³⁰ [30] The quintessential post-totalitarian individual is best personified by the chameleonic Hugo Pludek in Havel's play *The Garden Party*.

suspension of thought and responsibility for one's beliefs is what makes possible the banal, routine, everyday working of evil. Depersonalized individuals, "seeking the path of least resistance,"³¹ [31] and least fear, support the system's lies through their sheer inaction.

The post-totalitarian system seems to be airtight. First, ideological manipulation blurs the lines of truth and shuffles the societal value structure to fit the system's ever changing methods. The emptying of the public sphere deprives the individual of any support for his moral beliefs and he is forced to retreat into his small, personal world of doubt and conformity. The ready-made answers of ideology intervene to compensate for any last pangs of guilt. The result is that everyone participates in the system by simply acquiescing. By being silent and performing the automatic rituals of the system "each helps the other to be obedient."³² [32]

The recapturing of responsibility

*"Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us."*³³ [33]

For all its intricate system of control and subjugation, post-totalitarianism has a fantastic flaw, for the reason that it is built on lies. We lie to ourselves that no crimes are committed, that no one dies in prison, that no one is kept from saying what they believe, from going to school, from having a decent job simply because they come from an "unhealthy origin." But if the success

31 [31] Havel, "Dear Dr. Husak," 60.

32 [32] Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," 143.

33 [33] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 264

of lying and being lied to is the main weapon of the system than truth telling is rendered paramount: "where a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle and not only with respect to particulars, can truthfulness as such, unsupported by the distorting forces of power and interest, become a political factor of the first order. Where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he knows it or not has begun to act"³⁴ [34] But whereas Arendt touches only incidentally on this subject, Havel is famous for having made "living in Truth" the core of his philosophy and, even more importantly, the key to human responsibility and the basis for resisting any kind of oppression.

Havel's argument is that what can save the individual from falling into the "nothingness" of illusions is to assert his true self, his true ambitions, his sincere aspirations. Before ever contemplating joint revolutionary action, the individual has to take the most basic of steps; he has to step out of "living within a lie" and elect to "live within the Truth."³⁵ [35] He can stop putting the sign "Workers of the world unite!" in the shop's window, he can stop going to the party meetings, and he can stop voting in the arranged elections. But before explaining what "living in Truth" entails practically, it is first necessary to answer a key question: How is the isolated individual, facing the avalanche of organized lies, muster the stamina to summon truth, or safeguard the truth he never gave up? As Arendt says, thinking is a solitary activity, even more so when one is surrounded by lies. Where then does the moral strength of the truth-teller come from? Who is the truth-teller?

³⁴ [34] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 251.

³⁵ [35] Havel, 39

The truth-teller is, to put Havel in Arendtian terms, the individual who starts thinking. Thinking, that is, individually exercised thought, devoid of ideological recipes from outside, is not a trivial task in post-totalitarian conditions. Fundamentally, the post-totalitarian order appeals to the desire of men to relieve themselves of their existential burdens, and to gain a facile peace of mind. To satisfy this drive, the post-totalitarian system offers a ready-made, automatic answer to any question, a "mental short circuit" to avoid the uneasiness of any dilemma. As Havel argues in *The Anatomy of Reticence*, the post-totalitarian order is built on the "illusion that the demanding, unending, and unpredictable dialogue with conscience or with God can be replaced by the clarity of a pamphlet, that some human product, like a set of pulleys freeing us from physical effort can liberate us from the weight of personal responsibility and timeless sorrow."³⁶ [36] The project of the post-totalitarian world is thus far removed from the expression of free thought of any kind. It is just the opposite, because it aims at pulling men into forgetfulness and apathy, into a mental relaxation fatal to men's identity and ultimately to history itself.³⁷ [37]

The discovery that individuals in post-totalitarianism live in "a grotesque form of self-denial" does not require a sophisticated understanding of morality. Here Havel's logic has a lot in common with Arendt. Like Arendt he believes that moral "discoveries" are the result of assuming independent thought, of a dialectical exchange with one's own conscience. In Arendt's words, the disposition for moral judging does not require: "a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself

³⁶ [36] Havel, "The Anatomy of Reticence," in *Living in Truth*, 301-302.

³⁷ [37] In "The Power of the Powerless," Havel argues that the result of post-totalitarian standardization of life is the ultimately the freezing of history.

which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking."³⁸ [38] Like Arendt, Havel believes that thinking is an act of the will. We must consciously *start* thinking in order to shed foreign notions.

But this is where the similarity between Havel and Arendt ends. Although Arendt showed great insight into how thinking operates, she reached few and conflicting conclusions about its results. Interestingly, Arendt was also concerned with showing that thinking leads to the truth and the good, but the main essay dedicated to this topic, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, is incomplete and contradictory.

There is an essential difference between how Arendt and Havel understand thinking. For Arendt thinking is a process, an ability to question into social mores and values. The activity of thinking is best represented, in Arendt's view, by Socrates, who exemplifies the back and forth, dialogical method that is thinking. Arendt then, believes in thinking as a system, she believes in the rationality of the process, in employing categories logically and consistently the same way a mathematician believes in constructing equations. For Arendt, thinking is abstract and it deals with generalities (not particulars). There is a problem with Arendt's logic that Havel is able to overcome. Although Arendt wants to show that thinking leads to the truth, by pointing to Socrates as her ideal model, she points in a very different direction. The chief proposition she proves by using Socrates is that thinking, inquiring into one's opinions leads to a "paralysis of thought." In fact, she says, Socrates was frequently called the "electric ray" because he was able to stun his interlocutors with his questions. Socrates' inquiries leaves us merely with perplexities, they leave us amazed with our own indecisiveness. This is the reason why Arendt characterizes thinking as "uncertain, unverifiable, and self-destructive" and she concludes that "we cannot expect any moral

³⁸ [38] Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," 45.

propositions or commandments, no final code of conduct from the thinking activity,"³⁹ [39] because "thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics."⁴⁰ [40] It is thus a wonder that Arendt believed at all in the power of thinking to reveal the truth yet, at the end of her essays, she steadfastly holds to this belief: "The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down."⁴¹ [41]

There is a curious tension in Arendt's beliefs because she does not want to flatly argue that thinking unavoidably leads to the truth and moral behavior, but she does want to argue that thinking does lead to avoiding evil (if only because our exposed perplexities cause us to not act at all). Arendt wants us to believe that "evildoing results in a psychic dissonance of a kind that any thinking individual would dread" but she does not inquire into the basis of this dissonance. If evil clashes with our internal beliefs, there must inherently be something about us that repels evil, even at the level of mere thought. Havel provides for this gap. While he agrees with Arendt that thinking, by ourselves, when the norms of society have collapsed, can lead us towards the truth, he also correctly stipulates the basis of this conclusion. Havel argues that the internal forum that gives us hope of reaching the truth is the Memory of Being, a universal moral source that we share.

³⁹ [39] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 167.

⁴⁰ [40] Ibid, 176.

⁴¹ [41] Ibid, 189.

To formulate my interpretation of Havel here I must go back to the previous point about Havel's belief in the potentialities of human nature. At first glance it would seem that Havel simply believes that human beings contain every potentiality, every Platonic virtue and vice, and that our environment actualizes only a certain part of them. A closer reading however, reveals that his commitment to this thesis is much weaker than first suspected. Havel does believe that we contain every potentiality but he also believes that above them all stands the one, universal, uniting strand of humanity, which he calls the Memory of Being.⁴² [42] The Memory of Being is like a catalogue of the species in which we record the meaning of history. This "historical" spirit evolves and, in time, it dialectically teases out the truth out of passing existence. In other words, the Memory of Being, having the advantage of being the one thing to last over time immemorial, can resolve the clash between fact and fiction and discard the fiction. The telos of the Memory of Being is thus toward the truth. Post-totalitarianism was, in Havel's view, uniquely equipped to obscure this inner craving for authenticity. But, the "absolute horizon" we each carry in us can never be completely denied and it always lurks in our subconscious as the one master potential:

If every day someone takes orders in silence from an incompetent superior, if every day he solemnly performs ritual acts which he privately finds ridiculous, if he unhesitatingly gives answers to questionnaires which are contrary to his real opinions and is prepared to deny himself in public, if he sees no difficulty in feigning sympathy or even affection where, in fact, he feels only indifference and aversion, it still does not mean that he has entirely lost the use of one of the basic human senses, namely, the sense of dignity. All the fear one has endured, the dissimulation one has been forced into all this settles and accumulates somewhere in the bottom of our social consciousness, quietly fermenting.⁴³ [43]

42 [42] The idea of the Memory of Being was clearly taken from Hegel.

43 [43] Havel, "Dear Dr. Husak," 78.

The fact that we all innately share this human spirit makes for a natural human craving for truth. The Memory of Being contains that "absolute horizon" which is the grounding for morality and the source that guides us toward the truth. Thus, we have all the potential to be the truth-teller if only we made recourse to this hidden reservoir of universal morality. The individual who steps out of living within a lie needs not be special; he is anyone and everyone. We are all endowed with the possibility of finding our moral compass just as we are all able to think. Or, rather, we are all able to find our moral compass as soon as we start thinking.

The capacity of thinking without some universal principles is as useless as the capacity to solve equations without having the concept of numbers. Thinking, as a method, without the content of principles, can offer us little help. Thinking is possible only because we are grounded in the principles like "love, charity, sympathy, understanding, self-control, solidarity, friendship, feeling of belonging"⁴⁴ [44] (in pontuso p.121) and retrieving these principles, bringing them from the subconscious to the conscious is the basis for responsibility. Havel thus sees in the effort to live in Truth precisely the struggle to regain one's responsibility, toward his own self, and toward others - the responsibility of life itself. Without it, man is for all practical purposes dead. When the effort to fulfill one's calling is given up, when the search for meaning is aborted, man renounces the essence of humanity itself and embraces the possibility of endless evil. In this context, responsibility for Havel is the key to preservation of the self: "the secret of man, is the secret of his responsibility."⁴⁵ [45]

⁴⁴ [44] Vaclav Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 371

⁴⁵ [45] Ibid.

The regaining of existential responsibility through thinking is for Havel the clear beginning of our individual identity. Embracing the risks of free action decouples us from that huge impersonal grid of post-totalitarian power. In one of the letters to his wife Olga, Havel explains that identity is by definition unique, it has "degrees" and "types." The degree and type of identity are the result of a natural, dialectic process of evolution from the degree and type of responsibility that people assume in life. Identity therefore evolves out of responsibility; it is the "fundamental point from which all identity grows and by which it stands or falls."⁴⁶ [46]

Living in Truth, giving up the farcical life of post-totalitarian ideology, is the essential step in reassuming the existential burdens that make up identity in life. The self of the individual living in Truth is no longer delegated to the system. Reassuming the responsibility of doubt, of grappling with one's own incertitudes returns the self to the individual.

***Living in Truth* ♦ "the politics of the apolitical"**

Much has been said about his call for "living in Truth." Sometimes branded as idealistic, lacking the backbone of a political creed⁴⁷ [47] or the sharp teeth of a Frondist call to arms, the

⁴⁶ [46] Ibid.

⁴⁷ [47] Two contemporary Czech theorists and contributors to the original *The Power of the Powerless* essays collection, Miroslav Kusy, and Rudolf Battek both criticize Havel for not developing a political vision to supplant what they see as a primarily metaphysical argument. See Rudolf Battek, "Spiritual Values, independent initiatives and politics," and Miroslav Kusy, "Chartism and ♦Real' Socialism," in *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaclav Havel et al. , New York : Palach Press, 1985

idea of turning inwards in the face of oppression might appear to the superficial investigator as a dispirited call to resignation. My interpretation of Havel sharply clashes with such views of Havel's writings. Such a view of Havel's beliefs is at the very least an inexcusably simplistic one, unworthy of the evident complexities in the work of a writer who can hardly be accused of simple mindedness. Furthermore, such a view disregards the internal logic of Havel's argument. Havel's description of the totalitarian system is based precisely on its day-to-day *realities* and this perspective logically calls for a *practical* solution. In other words, while contemplating the extent of the "post-totalitarian" regime's involvement in the quotidian, Havel necessarily directs his attention toward an achievable, practical remedy for this state of affairs. Undoubtedly "living in Truth" has a distinct spiritual, individual, introspective side. Yet, the primary purpose of Havel's insights is precisely to conciliate the "condition of being free as a philosophical subject involved in solitary reflection" with the "condition of being free as a political subject involved in collective action."⁴⁸ [48]

In a system where ideology is power, the denial of ideology means denying the system. Post-totalitarianism is incapable of tolerating anything outside its own lies. The artificiality of the system is not publicly apparent as long as it is not confronted with reality. The totalitarian system *requires* "total politics and total ideology."⁴⁹ [49] There is no segment of the system where ideology can coexist with "living within truth." Living within truth is expressed in any kind of action that is not represented in the inventory of the system and as such any action that goes outside

⁴⁸ [48] Pirro, *Vaclav Havel and the Political Uses of Tragedy*, 232

⁴⁹ [49] Kusy, *Chartism and Real socialism*, in *The Power of the Powerless*, 158

the bounds of the system, however small, "denies it (the system) in principle, and threatens it in its entirety." There is no trivial dimension of "living within Truth."

For Havel , living within the Truth:

"Can be any means by which a person or a group revolts against manipulation: anything from a letter by intellectuals to a worker's strike, from a rock concert to a student demonstration, from refusing to vote in the farcical elections, to making an open speech at some official congress, or even a hunger strike (or, for that matter) any free expression of life♦including forms of expression to which in other social systems no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power."50 [50]

The individual's everyday acts of opposition have the potential to build his mechanism of self-defense. By building our "moral condition" we assert ourselves as free and as much more powerful than the system. In this view, the moral man becomes the "enemy in absolute"51 [51] of the system, "the enemy in his quintessential form" because what he opposes is the very world of appearances - "the fundamental pillar of the system."52 [52]

Havel argues that inevitably, the resisting individual will be punished by the system primarily because his actions do not have merely the value of an individual offence. They are much more encompassing in their effect. Havel argues that "by breaking the rules of the game, he has disrupted the game as such. He has exposed it as a mere game♦. And because the emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous has happened: by his action (he) has addressed the

50 [50] Havel , "The Power of the Powerless," 195

51 [51] Andrei Plesu, "An Imperial Peasant," in the section *The Christian World* of the Romanian newspaper *Free Romania*, No.25, 21 Jan. 1990

52 [52] Havel , "The Power of the Powerless," 147


world."⁵³ [53] The existence of a dissenting attitude creates a precedent, it gives a glimpse of a potential future. The true value of "everyday" oppositional acts stands in their spillover effect.⁵⁴ [54]

To live within Truth, to walk beyond the bounds of what is acceptable in the system, has, by definition, political implications. The nature of the totalitarian system is to politicize every aspect of life, to define, in ideological terms, every act of life. Breaking the rules of the system means by default going against the politics of the system. Yet, what is peculiar about living in Truth is that it does not propose any political (or ideological) alternative. On the contrary, what living in Truth means for Havel is precisely the de-politization of life, the return of a part of life to its rightful place in the private, apolitical (or what Havel calls "pre-political") sphere. Living within Truth offers an alternative to the system, which is much more basic than a political creed: the true aims of life itself, the necessity for identity, individuality and creativity.

Keane argues that Havel is deeply concerned about the ruinous effects of the hybris of political power. Political creeds raise political aims, and political aims prompt the rise of a pathology of excuses for the means employed to achieve those aims. Political power is behind the rise and fall of dogmas, behind the succession of different forms of political terror in history. Havel's concern is to avert the creation of a new myth, of a new "bridge of excuses." As Keane argues,

⁵³ [53] Ibid.

⁵⁴ [54] With interesting and original insight Pirro argues that Havel's view of the power of example is to be understood through Havel's experience with theatre. In Pirro's analysis Havel draws a parallel between the cathartic experience of the spectator watching a tragedy and the effect of "living within Truth" over the individuals in the post-totalitarian world. Consequently Havel bases his view on what Pirro calls the "human sense of dramatic order". Pirro argues that the role of the tragic "as providing an occasion for becoming reconciled to existential burdens constitutes a (third) distinctive aspect of Havel's tragic thought".p.245

the problem that Havel sees in any political system is that it creates archetypes, develops categories, definitions, and assigns meanings, places, tasks. It encloses life and men in an abstractly defined ideal model. Life then becomes a struggle of those disadvantaged by the "definitions" of a particular system at a particular time. In response, Havel is trying to develop a parallel or "independent" life within society, which "empowers the powerless, preventing them from ever becoming masters of others."⁵⁵ [55] Within this parallel life the creativity and individuality of man flourishes. One is safe in assuming that Havel would relegate cultural expression of any kind to precisely this sphere that is immune from political authority. Culture for Havel should exist in a sphere of its own, free to express anything and everything, to criticize anything and everything. Cultural life for Havel has nothing to do with the political arrangement of a state; it has a life of its own, spawned by the free imagination of man. Human creativity goes so far beyond the possibilities of any political system to quantify and ordinate, that it cannot be but "independent." The political arrangement should acknowledge cultural life as such  independent. Havel calls the cultural arena of life the arena of "antipolitics," not because it is against political life, but because it wants no part in its kind of power. As Gyorgy Konrad argues:

Antipolitics and government work in two different dimensions, two separate spheres. Antipolitics neither supports nor opposes the government; it is something different. Its people are fine right where they are; they form a network that keeps watch on political power, exerting pressure on the basis of their cultural and moral stature alone...That is their right and their obligation, but above all it is their self-defense.⁵⁶ [56]

⁵⁵ [55] John Keane, *Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* (New York : Basic Books, 2000), p.286

⁵⁶ [56] Gyorgy Konrad, *Antipolitics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 230-231

The urge for an independent life of society is not by any means a call for passivity. On the contrary, Havel is calling for both an active life of the mind and a change in the "outward" life in society. This change is visible, it is seen by others, contemplated by others and eventually replicated. It is the decisive step in the strategy of overturning the system from the inside. For Havel , compared to the traditional revolutionary, the natural sequence of events is reversed. Societal "reawakening" comes necessarily before the change in political system. One has to shake off the blinding veil of ideology before ever being able to reform the political system *for the better*.

But this is not a lesson peculiar to post-totalitarianism. Any political system comes with its own ideological baggage that has the potential to stifle independent thought. At best, political systems aim to convince and gain the consents of their citizens; at worst, they terrorize society into submitting to ideological requirements. To make the difference between consent and submission one has to be, first, an independent thinker. Not allowing any political regime to stifle the independent life of the mind is the essence of Havel 's message to anyone, anywhere. Living in Truth is not incompatible with a certain type of government as much as it is incompatible with a certain type of political life.
