

What Form of Existentialism is there in Havel's Concept of Dissent?

Hejdánek's Critique of Havel

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Abstract:

The Czech dissident movement included thinkers who searched for a morally pure, parallel polis, and who felt comfortable within its isolation. The philosophers of Charter 77 (Jan Patočka and Ladislav Hejdánek especially), by contrast, rejected the idea of being morally superior to their opponents. It is interesting to consider where Václav Havel stands at this crossroads. Havel very much cooperated with the above-mentioned philosophers and was inspired by them in his own writing and agency. On the other hand, Havel undoubtedly performed a certain moral-existential concept of dissent. In this paper I examine Havel's existential concept. In particular, after distinguishing between two existential approaches in Havel's writings, I analyse two fundamental philosophical critiques of Havel in the work of Ladislav Hejdánek. According to Hejdánek, Havel 1) identifies intellectuals with non-politicians, i.e. he is governed by the incorrect dualism of the political versus the non-political, and 2) is self-focused and moralising, i.e. he keeps too much within his own self (subjectivity) and "a given" (existent, objective) world. Given this critique, I will systematise Hejdánek's objections and suggested solutions. In the first case, I see the solution in a more detailed distinction: we should distinguish between politics and non-politics (intellectuals) but also non-political politics. In the second case, we should look for the essence (focal point) of man not in his morality but outside it: man should orient himself "out of his self".

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The Czech dissident movement included thinkers who reduced politics to morality, who searched for a morally pure, parallel polis, and who felt comfortable within its isolation.¹ The philosophers of Charter 77 (Jan Patočka

¹ This tendency encompassed the occasional justification of oppositional activity by means of personal satisfaction in connection with feelings of singularity and of catalysing or actually

and Ladislav Hejdíánek especially),² by contrast, emphasised that, as dissidents, “least of all do they wish to be any moral authority or social conscience. They condemn no one and judge no one.”³ The idea of being morally superior to their opponents was explicitly rejected by these philosophers. It is interesting to consider where Václav Havel stands at this crossroads. Havel very much respected the above-mentioned philosophers, cooperated with them and was inspired by them in his own writing and agency. On the other hand, Havel undoubtedly performed a certain moral-existential concept of dissent. In this paper I examine Havel's existential concept, especially with regard to the philosophers' critique of Havel's approach.

In particular, after distinguishing between two existential approaches in Havel's writings, I analyse two fundamental philosophical critiques of Havel in the work of Ladislav Hejdíánek.⁴ According to Hejdíánek, Havel 1) identifies intellectuals with non-politicians, i.e. he is governed by the incorrect dualism of the political versus the non-political, and 2) is self-focused and moralising, i.e. he keeps too much within his own self (subjectivity) and “a given” (existent, objective) world. Given this critique, I will systematise Hejdíánek's objections and suggested solutions. In the first case, I see the solution in a more detailed distinction: we should distinguish between politics and non-politics (intellectuals) but also non-political politics. In the second case, we should look for the essence (focal point) of man not in his morality but outside it: man should orient himself “out of his self”.⁵ In other words, with regard to

initiating historical events. Compare Pithart, in Otáhal, M., *Opoziční proudy v české společnosti 1969–1989*. Praha, ÚSD 2011, p. 198–199; Skilling, G. H., *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*. London, George Allen & Unwin 1981, p. 52: “marry ghetto”. Havel acknowledges a certain introversion: in his own words, he wrote his famous letter to Gustáv Husák self-indulgently: “I actually wrote it primarily for myself.... I felt greatly relieved and rejuvenated by writing it.” In Vaněk, M. and Urbášek, P. (eds.), *Vítězové, poražení? Životopisná interview*. Praha: ÚSD, 2005, p. 135. Nevertheless, generally Havel refuses to organise and understand “the parallel structures... as a retreat into a ghetto and as an act of isolation” – see in detail Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless” (hereafter PP), transl. Paul Wilson, *East European Politics and Societies*, 32, 2018, No. 2, p. 396.

2 Charter 77 was an informal civic initiative in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, based on the Declaration of Charter 77, published on 6 January 1977 and bearing the names of the first 242 signatories. See “Charter 77”, Wikipedia.

3 Patočka, J. “The Obligation to Resist Injustice”, in E. Kohák (ed.), *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 342.

4 Ladislav Hejdíánek (1927–2020) was a philosopher (a student of and later a friend of Jan Patočka's) and one of the founders of Charter 77. After Patočka's death, Hejdíánek took over Patočka's position as one of Charter 77's three spokesmen. For Hejdíánek's role in Charter 77, see Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 2015, p. 186–191. There is a short biography in English at the website “Memory of Nations”: <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/hejdanekladislav-1927>.

5 Hejdíánek, L., “Filosofie a společnost”, *Filosofický časopis*, 38, 1990, No. 1–2, p. 62: “[T]he centre of gravity of human being is not in his morals, but is outside of him himself.” Hejdíánek, L.,

Hejdánek's writings, I will scrutinise whether there are two things missing from Havel's concept of the power of the powerless: 1) realism, i.e. help for these who need it most acutely (impoverished beings); and 2) objectivity, i.e. regard for the results and solutions of particular problems or situations rather than for the motivations and interests of individuals.

1. Moderate and radical existentialism

In my opinion, there is a reasonable approach – connected with the rejection of being a moral authority – in saying that politics should not play an existential role, because political existentialism “transforms problems of political decision-making and constitutionality to questions of cultural existence and national destiny. As if (...) the target of building a constitutional state was national self-determination and the finding of some authentic existence and not the formation of representative government limited by civil rights and liberties.”⁶ We need to reject any “ideology of political existentialism which promises to resolve the absurdity of individual life by the absoluteness of collective will.”⁷ The approach of the Chartist philosophers agrees with this rejection: “Thus the real question concerning the individual is not at issue between liberalism and socialism, between democracy and totalitarianism, which for all their profound differences equally overlook all that is neither objective nor a role. For the same reason, a resolution of their conflicts cannot resolve the problem of setting humans in their place, resolving their wandering alienated from themselves and from the place that belongs to them.”⁸

Here, in my opinion, is the basic contrast with Václav Havel, who inclines to such a political existentialism. He does not hesitate to assert that “[L]iving within the truth in the post-totalitarian system becomes the chief breeding ground for independent, alternative political ideas ...”⁹ These ideas and the change of political situation stemming from them imply “the fundamental reconstitution of the position of people in the world, their relationships to

“Krozhovorům o J. L. Hromádkovi”, in L. Hejdánek, *Setkání a odstup*. Praha: Oikoymenh 2010 (originally 1959), p. 214; Hejdánek, L., “Havel – filosof? Rozhovor Michala Urbana s Ladislavem Hejdánkem (24. září 2008, Písek)”, in L. Hejdánek, *Havel je uhlík*. Praha, Sešity Knihovny Václava Havla 2009, p. 103.

6 Přibáň, J., *Obrana ústavnosti, aneb Česká otázka v postnacionální Evropě*. Praha, Slon 2014, p. 14–15.

7 Přibáň, J., “Resisting Fear”, in F. Tava and D. Meacham (eds.), *Thinking After Europe: Jan Patočka and Politics*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2016, p. 41.

8 Patočka, J., *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, transl. E. Kohák. Chicago, Open Court 1996, p. 115.

9 PP, p. 372.

themselves and to each other, and to the universe".¹⁰ Besides, it is not only in "The Power of the Powerless" that Havel openly says he is solving "a problem of life itself", not a problem of "political line or program".¹¹ Politics is a secondary issue: "[L]iving within the truth is ... the only meaningful basis of any independent act of political import,"¹² and only "profound existential and moral changes in society" will give rise to better politics.¹³ These changes grow out of "the everyday human world" and return to it. Politics is based on everydayness, on "the world of daily tension between the aims of life and the aims of the system".¹⁴ It is possible to say, then, that "... for Havel everydayness was an arena of existential purity, in which people might reveal their genuine needs and desires and once more start to build political life afresh". Dissident life is here "a reaction to the crisis of identity, moral challenge to truth, that cures broken or spoiled identity".¹⁵

According to the philosophers quoted above, on the contrary, even democrats or liberals in their true form do not need to live within the truth; it is enough when they systematically care about society, when they participate in constitutional government and when they are actively interested in realising ideas about the rightful administration of the life of the city, the nation, Europe or the whole world, and in the execution of these ideas. Living within the truth, in addition to the struggle between the aims of life and the aims of the system, is a moral and existential issue, not a political one. There is no *direct* connection between the truth as it is understood by philosophical concepts of living within the truth (e.g. in Patočka or Heidegger) and politics, which nevertheless does not mean that politics is not interested in the truth at all.

But Havel was not unambiguous and one-sided. On the other hand, I agree with the scholars who say that he – also in "The Power of the Powerless" – justifiably "called for the retrieval of politics as such"¹⁶ and rejected the idea of politics "turning into an existential matter of decision-making related to bare living".¹⁷ Nevertheless, the fact that his activities as a dissident already concerned, at least originally and purposely, the realisation of non-political

10 PP, p. 377.

11 PP, p. 387.

12 PP, p. 387.

13 PP, p. 377.

14 PP, p. 382.

15 Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 343.

16 Hlaváček, P., "Moc? Bezmocný? Na okraj jedné havlovské politické meditace", in J. Suk and K. Andělová (eds.), *Jednoho dne se v našem zelináři cosi vzbouří: Eseje o Moci bezmocných*. Praha, USD 2016, p. 76.

17 Příbáň, J., "Resisting Fear", p. 41.

politics¹⁸ bears evidence to the fact that the “true politics” he called for, and for which he wanted to make room through his non-politically political activism, has some existential extension (in its association with non-political politics, which is defined by care for the free and critical education, culture and spiritual life of individuals, the nation or humankind).

Why and what political existentialism in the case of Havel, then? From Havel’s approach it is better to select “moderate existentialism”, which may be grasped as a general motive of at least most of the Chartists and led them to the beginning and continuation of their common civic initiative: “It was a fundamental human need to live in accordance with one’s own self. The need not to live within a lie and openly oppose the situation of normalisation, in which all Czechoslovaks were by all sorts of methods forced to pretend an agreement with what they did not agree with.”¹⁹ So no radical existential purity, then, but rather the most basic correspondence between act and thought: do not pretend on the most basic level of life. Such an approach does not in any case require a deep effort at authenticity or living within the truth; it does not need any deep self-examination or enforcement in personal and public life. The famous examples of the greengrocer and the brewer can be read as stories of ordinary people who in the first case (greengrocer) do not act in accord with themselves but in the second case (brewer) do. And moderate existentialism does not only insist on unconditional public sharing of what one thinks (greengrocer) nor on a courageous stand against all (brewer). Simply, it takes into consideration the situation, the different significance of different truths, etc. In this moderate sense, Havel himself points out how impersonal and unimportant is the greengrocer’s posting of the slogan in the window.²⁰ From time to time such a compromise is unavoidable: it is important to live in harmony with himself, though not to an absolute extent only, but “to a certain extent at least”.²¹

I do not wish to decide here which form of existentialism Havel maintained more strongly; in short, I believe that he oscillated between both

18 Havel continues in Masaryk’s non-political politics as “a means of a long-term internalization of persuasion about democracy, humanity and responsible being as epoch-making entities”. Havel in essence wants the moral reconstruction of society as a creation of the groundwork of politics. It means first of all critically handling the consumption character of society. For more detail, see Havelka, M., “‘Apolitics’, ‘Anti-politics’, ‘Non-political Politics’ and ‘Sub-politics’ as Threats and Challenges”. *Social Studies*, 13, 2016, No. 1, p. 9–22; Hejduk, T., “Charter 77 Still Alive: The Concept of Nonpolitical Politics in the Work of Ladislav Hejdiánek”. *Comenius (Journal of Euro-American Civilization)*, 4, 2017, No. 1, p. 67–85; Dalberg, D., *Die nichtpolitische Politik: Eine Tschechische Strategie und Politikvorstellung*. Stuttgart, Ibidem-Verlag 2013.

19 Palouš, M., “Čtyři poznámky ohledně ‘zdrojů’ Charty 77”, in A. Freimanová (ed.), *Charta vlastníma očima (40. výročí vzniku Charty 77)*. Praha, Knihovna Václava Havla 2018, p. 22.

20 PP, p. 364–365.

21 PP, p. 376.

forms, and that the moderate one is the more reasonable and realistic. This means abandoning the very demanding idea of “living within the truth” as a political starting point,²² and the abomination of any system,²³ which is, let us say, a moralistic, judgemental approach (those who do not fulfil this living within the truth are living within a lie) and a one-sided view of the post-modern “consumer” society. Thus, in the radical form of existentialism, the greengrocer, instead of being a reasonable man of compromise who places the slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” in the window of his fruit-and-vegetable shop and then manages the shop and its customers fairly, will never place a slogan in his window that he does not agree with; if he did so, his would be a “‘bare life’ chained by fear” that would never find and create a meaningful life. In this radical existentialism, Havel (and partly Patočka) identifies the meaningful life only with “‘life at the summit’, which clearly sees the temporality and finiteness of human existence and is therefore capable of understanding what is at stake in the routines of daily life and transcending them by the resisting spiritual turn – the solidarity of the shaken”.²⁴ Such a “Titan’s life” rests on a high-toned refusal of given truth and a eulogy (celebration) of searched truth.²⁵ Patočka (though similar to Havel only at certain points and in certain texts) calls for the “shaken certainty of given sense”, which means refusing any given aims, truths, lives, etc. Thus, he risks “pulling not only against inertia and self-oblivion but also against a certain essential self-understanding of human life as something that is here to be accepted, and in this acceptance to be moved towards and in this moving to be fulfilled – and what in this sense must understand itself teleologically to manage even to be”.²⁶

If we would then attach ourselves to this radical version of existentialism (in politics), Havel’s ambitions would become unrealistic: to sum up, if he wanted to evoke “a genuine, profound and lasting change for the better”, and if he wanted to derive it “from human existence, from the fundamental reconstitution of the position of people in the world, their relationships to themselves and to each other, and to the universe”,²⁷ only then, because of

22 PP, p. 385, 387.

23 PP, e.g. section XIII. See, for example, Havel’s emphasis on the “tension between the aims of life and the aims of the system” and his one-sided sympathy for the aims of life.

24 Přibáň, J., “Resisting Fear”, p. 44.

25 On the lack of humility, see Patočka’s own description of the philosopher’s life from the insight and as a will to insight, in which nevertheless “philosophy does not lose its problematic character and keeps its audacity. Against the insight as a life’s directive it is possible to come forward with a reproach of elitism, formality and the menace of scepticism.” Patočka, J., *Evropa a doba poevropská*. Praha, LN 1992, p. 32.

26 Karfík, F., “Proč je Patočkova filosofie dějin Kacířská?” *Reflexe*, No. 12, 1994, p. 3–7.

27 PP, p. 377.

these excessive premises, might “living within the truth” become the platform of the fight against the government and regime, and the basic programme of this fight might be *the shaking of all certainties and looking for the meaning of life*. In this radical existential approach, or existential revolution, the campaign against the regime would become part of the campaign against consumerism, technocracy, systems and everyday life²⁸ without any ambition for transcendent meaning or any ambition to relate to its own being in a way that it is concerned with being itself (a totalitarian regime being characterised by the obtrusion of life not concerned with its meaning).

The immoderateness, incorrectness and unreality of this existential approach can be demonstrated not only by reference to a generally mistaken reduction of politics to the moral; it also brings quite concrete difficulties. For example, one of the fundamental objections to the playwright’s stance is that it is in no way good to shatter the illusions of people impoverished by a “modern” loss of sense or faith in possible meaning. Any such intervention in the life of people must be responsible, must bear in mind *correction (reformation)*, which is not present in a mere shattering of illusions, which people in any case do not take very seriously. Unless the author at least indicates an acceptable and realistic point of departure for people to extricate themselves from a crisis or absurd situation in a dignified manner, the likely response of those confronted with a sophisticated question, as posited by scholars, will be resignation or cynicism.²⁹

In contrast to Havel’s sometimes very general and very demanding “living within the truth”,³⁰ other non-politically political politicians (dissidents), and

28 In the case of everydayness, I see a double account in Havel’s texts: first, ordinary daily human life is a degenerated life of consumption; second, ordinary human life represents the intentions of life that need to be enforced against the false intentions of the system (see e.g. PP, p. 382). My basic doubt is related to the statement that “the independent life of society develops out of living within the truth” (p. 386), that for example young musicians “wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth” (p. 372). On the contrary, the independent life of society is, in my opinion, the basis for living within the truth. The independent life of society, or daily human life, is formed by all sorts of interests, programmes and desires, and some of them might be focused on truth (but not all of them and not necessarily as the main concern, i.e. this independence is not any guarantee of truth). A struggle between life and the system itself is also very doubtful: “Life is not outside economic, political, legal, or technological structures. It is manifested in them! Every contestation of legitimacy, therefore, is a contestation of self-description of these structures and not some pre-political ultimate power of human reason to fundamentally shake ‘manipulative’ structures of the system.” ... “The self-constitution of different social systems, described as autopoiesis in contemporary social theory, does not preserve social totality but affirms and further enhances differentiation of modern society.” Přebáň, J., “Resisting Fear”, p. 42.

29 Hejdánek, L., “Variace a reflexe na témata vězeňských dopisů Václava Havla”. *Lísty*, 20, 1990 (originally 1983), No. 6, p. 6–19 (10–11).

30 Living within the truth sometimes seems to be just living a spontaneous life (suggested by Havel’s advocating of the intentions of life against the intentions of the system), whereas in

even Havel himself, know and specify from the beginning what particularly they want to achieve: they want, in distinction to power politics, to gain “only” conveniences such as a functional civil society, the rule of law, the protection of human rights and, with these, a true connected politics consistent with the relation of free fellow citizens. Existential “shaking” is neither the motivation nor the aim. There is a requirement for the individual will of citizens, but this requirement is limited – first of all by a common search for things generally beneficial.

2. Non-politically political intellectual

One argument that Havel, in his radical existentialism, wrongly identified or associated with the existential and political fields was the immoderate charge he levelled at Czech intellectuals for the irresponsibility of their political passivity and efforts at independence.³¹ Ladislav Hejždánek responded to Havel's charge with the distinction between non-political politics and politics and argued that Havel the playwright was for a “deeper and crucial measure of national and social being” more important than Havel the politician.³² Havel, “under the pretence of false social responsibility, neglects his most serious task, namely, to be a playwright.”³³ To be a playwright also implies non-political politics: “Theatre in a political atmosphere is something very important, it is a highly political matter; but theatre is not a political institution in a sense that it participates in power, for example ... that it has its representatives in state agency, etc. ... [a] position of power creates a barrier for seeing reality in its true dimensions and in the light of truth.”³⁴

Havel, in moving from the theatre to politics, prefers politics in a narrower sense to politics in a broad sense; he decides for an institutional, technically powerful position at the expense of the crucial, non-conformist, sovereign struggle for a better society and world. Hejždánek, against Havel's decision, quotes Masaryk's urge that political and state life is only a slighter

fact it needs a complete, systematic change of life, because life in its spontaneity is governed by consumption style.

31 Václav Havel's speech, as President of the Czechoslovak Republic, to the US Congress, 21 February 1990.

32 Hejždánek, L., “Dramatik, nebo politik?”; Hejždánek, L., *Havel je uhlík*, p. 88–96 (95–96): “[F]or this deeper and crucial feature of national and social existence are cultural composers much more important than politicians, ... dramatists are more important than presidents”; Hejždánek, L., “Intelektuál a politika”, in Hejždánek, L., *Havel je uhlík*, p. 85–87.

33 Hejždánek, L., *Úvod do filosofování*. Praha, Oikoymenth 2012, p. 88–89.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 89. The relation between philosophy and politics is parallel: “Philosophy serves society and politics by being proper philosophy; among its tasks are not to govern or to serve governors by anything else than truth” (*Ibid.*).

part of spiritual life.³⁵ Spiritual life, which consists in the *deepening of sensibility* (through, for example, the theatre) and *critical, rational reflection* on the “sensed”, and in the end also a comprehensible familiarisation of other people with achieved results, is the only thing that might reasonably, and on a long-term basis, transform knowledge and the face of affairs in society (which is also Havel’s aim in “The Power of the Powerless”). Only in this way does the intellectual participate in social and political life, which he thus co-constitutes and co-founds: “[E]very thought, moral and spiritual work is also a political work in a broad sense” (hence so-called non-political politics). Any other participation in politics in a narrower sense – technical or professional politics (for example, acceptance of political office) – than through this transformation of consciousness is necessarily a dereliction of this deeper intellectual mission.³⁶

This interpretation stands on a refusal of the groovy preconception of the importance of professional politics (for example, understanding the post of president as a “top base”), which in reality should not play a greater role in our lives than do, say, the traffic police, who penalise traffic offences, manage the flow of traffic, etc. but do not interfere with where and when people go. Whereas intellectuals, dramatists or philosophers orient the direction of individual lives and the course of events in society, politicians should only care about the availability of resources and the background functioning that allows people the free and just realisation of all sorts of plans. Havel unfortunately succumbed to the prejudice regarding the importance of power (professional) politics and forgot that his urgent task fell within the competency of non-political politics, which is the only thing that can provide what he expects from professional politics.³⁷

Nevertheless, Hejdánek contradicts himself by this critique. When he (together with Havel) differentiates between true and false politicians, then the presupposition of this distinction opposes the simile of the politician as

35 “I treat politics as very important, but not as a main and chief for the nation: we have to care mainly and chiefly about inner politics, about the moral and cultural progress of the society. Our politics only on this broader ground of cultural programme may be successful.” Quotation from Masaryk in L. Hejdánek, *Dopisy příteli IV.*, dopis č. 3 (60), 1980, Archiv Ladislava Hejdánka (ALH).

36 Hejdánek, L., *Intelektuál a politika*, p. 86. In this spirit, another Czech philosopher Emanuel Rádl (1873–1942) complained that Masaryk, on whom Realists (originally established in the Czech Realist Party) relied after the war, could not fight for new ways of thinking, etc., because he became a professional politician and accepted political office: “[H]e has today his special tasks.”: Rádl, E., “Náš úkol”. *Realistická stráž*, 1, 1920, No. 1, p. 2.

37 Hejdánek, L., “Dramatik, nebo politik?” p. 95–96; Hejdánek, L., *Dopisy příteli III.*, dopis č. 3 (43), 1980, ALH.

a traffic administrator or watchman: the true politician is, according to both thinkers, something more; he or she is a kind of mediator between spiritual people (artistic, scientific and creative) and ordinary folk, and attempts (politically and technically) to implement the best in the state, to implement what scientists, philosophers and other spiritual people reveal or devise. In this sense, a true politician is also a non-political politician and forms an association (albeit one filled with tension) with spiritual people. Instead of doing other things, it is important that the politician also attempts, at least potentially, to preserve the possibility of a direct relation to the truth (philosophers, artists ...), as well as the chance to make use of this relation on the state level he controls. In this sense, the engaged intellectual and the true politician overlap and form a fragile unity.³⁸

If the politician might also be an inventive individual partaking in “the art of the realisation of the improbable” (whereas the pseudo-politician reduces politics to the art of the probable),³⁹ then Hejdránek's critique of Havel's entry into professional politics is understandable only if Havel is seen as being in the ranks of pseudo-politicians, which is simply nonsense. The only possible critique of Havel must be based on the fact that spiritual activity (art, science, philosophy, etc.) is deeper than any political activity, which is less demanding of a given person and her qualities. However, a politician may and should participate in this higher activity, more or less, and Havel starts from this premise, though in his radical existentialism he exaggerated this stance. Because of this exaggeration he could disregard the difference (stressed by Hejdránek) between the operations of artists, spiritual individuals, scientists and politicians. Otherwise, in *The Power of the Powerless* he not only upholds the thesis that existentialism (the individual either supports the deceitful regime and destroys her substantive intentions or resists the system and lives according to these intentions) culminates in non-political politics, not politics, as described above. This is in spite of the fact that even during his presidency, Havel was able to preserve certain existentialist features.⁴⁰

38 Not only in PP does Havel also urge that the consequences of an existential revolution can and must be felt in politics, in the political reconstruction of society (see, for example, p. 403).

39 See Hejdránek, L., “Reflexe v politice a otázka politického subjektu, O místo filosofie v politickém životě”. *Filosofický časopis*, 38, 1990 (originally 1976), No. 6, p. 746–761, where the philosopher writes about politics as “the art of the realisation of the improbable”. Havel also later wrote on politics as the art of the impossible: Havel, V., “Projev k občanům z 1. ledna 1990; in V. Havel (Zelenka, J., ed.) *Spisy*, sv. 6. *Projevy z let 1990–1992*. Praha, Torst p. 15.

40 Znoj, M., “Havlova antipolitika na různý způsob”. *Soudobé dějiny*, XXI, 2014, No. 3, p. 410–421 (419–421).

3. Subjectivism and judgementalism vs. realism, impoverishment and non-existent truth

The most fundamental critique of Havel's radically existential approach is the charge that he is self-centred and moralising, i.e. that he keeps too much within his own subjectivity and the "given" (existent, objectified) world (moralising is a problem not because it represents a different area from the political but because it is a sign of limitation). Hejdánek's suggested solution: because man's centre of gravity is not in himself (nor in his existent morality) but rather is outside, he should primarily direct himself "out of his self".

Here we must briefly pay attention to the collision between care for the self and solidarity with the impoverished and oppressed. Whereas political moralists (and at times Havel too) see the essence of contemporary problems in the moral crisis of the individual, and speak of the necessity to proceed from living within a lie to living authentically within the truth, political realists (e.g. Hejdánek) speak primarily of the struggle against human poverty, or the battle on behalf of the weak and oppressed. We should not be concerned with the choice of living within the truth, i.e. with the development of the autonomous and, in this sense, free contemplation, decision and conduct of the individual, but rather with action in support of the oppressed, who, when viewed from the position of the autonomous individual, are not free. This is actually a polemic with a liberal tradition. If Havel, as such a liberal, pushes forward the ideal of freedom building upon the intentions of life and living in harmony with oneself, with one's feelings, opinions and plans,⁴¹ then the (Czech) tradition of realistic thinking,⁴² on the contrary, builds upon what these intentions damage and force to collapse. In the first case (liberalism), each of us follows his or her own interests, and each of us

41 For example, "The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person", PP, p. 366.

42 "Czech realism", which Hejdánek found inspiring, consists of two streams. The first is *Christian*: God's struggle for man takes place in the here and now, and the Christian fights against the misery of this world, i.e. particular people are "reality" because of which the Saviour descended to the space-time world, to the body. At the same time, this is not individualistic subjectivism; man is not the measure of truth, but rather truth (the Gospel) is a measure of man. The second stream is political tradition: a good politician is more than the instrument of a party; he/she should put forward the political idea of the Czech nation and its new direction, and on this basis he/she should change thought and practice. Realists measure themselves by new events and in light of their truth, but at the same time they regard man as a builder, not simply as a bystander in the world. According to the realists, we have to look for truth (critically, intellectually) and warrant for public actions by our whole conscience and knowledge. The realists, headed by T. G. Masaryk, founded their own political party; Masaryk and E. Rádl are the most famous among them. Compare also the distinction between political moralism and realism in Bernard Williams, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory", in Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 2005, p. 1-17.

values above all freedom from what leads us away from those interests (an injured man in the street, a helpless child or the system of the post-totalitarian regime), “the elementary need of human beings to live ... in harmony with themselves.”⁴³ In the second case, we care about freedom from what leads us away from crucial matters *hic et nunc*. For example, the sight of an injured man in the street who needs help frees us from our plan that we were just about to realise:⁴⁴ here, challenges that are external to us govern the need to live in harmony.

Even if, at first sight, a just moral obligation seems to be an example of what carries us away from our intentions, of what prevents us from living purely according to ourselves, in reality this is not completely true. Simple identification with moral or ethical norms (laws, rules) is moralism (judgmentalism), and the more responsible and demanding path is to ally oneself with (biblical) realism: “The puritanical absolutism of the requirement not to lie has little in common with the realism of the Old Testament prophets; the more abundant justice in the Sermon on the Mount relates to quite different matters than some kind of scrupulous weighing of truth and untruth. The law of Moses forbids the bearing of false witness against one’s neighbour.”⁴⁵ Hejdánek also attributes such moralising to Havel: “[L]iving within the truth ... in Havel’s case has an even bourgeois-moralistic hue. For him, living within the truth was to speak the truth, which he demonstrated by not travelling on the tram without a ticket. He rendered it dreadfully superficial.”⁴⁶ If truth is to mean something, such as moral conscientiousness or the conclusions of the examination of one’s inner experiences, then we can occupy a relatively indifferent standpoint in relation to it, and truth for us has no fundamental significance. However well the individual may have penetrated her own inner being and described her feelings, knowledge and intentions, and realised these intentions, this may not always be to the good, and may in itself be harmful. No matter how conscientiously a man has considered, let us say,

43 PP, p. 376.

44 Hejdánek, L., “Jaká láska?” in R. Stránský (ed.), *Sborník k sedmdesátinám Milana Balabána*. Praha, Onyx 1999, p. 45–55.

45 Hejdánek, on the interviews about J. L. Hromádka, in Hejdánek, L., *Setkání a odstup*, p. 214; Hejdánek rejects morality as the essence of man or as a fundamental framework that must be taken into consideration upon deciding and acting in several places: for example, see Hejdánek, L., “Filosofie a společnost”, p. 62: “[T]he focal point of man is not in his moral being but is outside of his self...” Man as a “given” (objective) being is not identical with the self, that in his endeavour to attain an identity (and authenticity) he cannot merely rely upon himself. Today we should in any case know that “man must seek himself beyond himself, i.e. outside the framework of that which he (already) is”.

46 Hejdánek, L., “Havel – filosof?” (Havel – philosopher?), Interview with Ladislav Hejdánek by Michal Urban (24 September 2008, Písek), in Hejdánek, L., *Havel je uhlík*, p. 103.

the logical coherence of his thought, or the time he has devoted to an examination of the objectivity of his assertions, what is always more important is where and how he expresses himself and acts: “Truth or untruth, expressed in support of the centre of power, necessarily becomes ideology; in ideology truth and untruth become the same, because they are subordinated to a final goal, which is a limited interest (in our case the interest of the regime).”⁴⁷ At the end of the day, it is crucial whether we act on behalf of the weak and oppressed or on behalf of the powerful. Only in this sense of really sticking up for the oppressed and poor is this important matter also truth.

Thus, Hejdánek warns against the “prevalence of judgmentalism ... over the approach of the moral person, who orientates on the situation, sensitively considers her stance and makes her decision ever again and again.”⁴⁸ Instead of a refusal of moralising (characterised by insensitive generalisation that disregards the situation), Hejdánek refers to the difference between moral subjectivism that focuses on purity of moral motivation and moral objectivism that cares about morally justifiable results. He prefers objectivism, being already convinced of the fact that the “Jewish and Christian main tradition is largely objectivistic and situational; though an exaggerated insistence on motivation and the so-called clean decision was not rare, but it represented a dangerous spiritualistic deformation.”⁴⁹ A good example is forgiveness: forgiveness makes sense only if it “objectively” stops cumulative and assertive evil; it becomes an illusion when we want to reduce it to our relationship to other people, *id est* to our own, private matter.

In other words, a regard for the truth that consists in the reality to come (the non-given, forthcoming future) and in the reality of the situation of the oppressed (*id est* the truth that consists in some activity, responding to both mentioned realities) collides with Havel’s regard for (or focus on) the self.⁵⁰ In *Letters to a Friend* Hejdánek stresses that the battle taken up by the Chartists should be neither about maintaining the *semblance* of their credibility nor about *actual* care of the self. Focus on the self or one’s inner being, tides of emotions and similar endeavours are ultimately sterile. In his criticism of Havel’s texts, Hejdánek, in this spirit, stresses – as an example – that the individual requires others in order to attain harmony, inner peace and his own self. Thus, it is not possible to think of the self otherwise than in the second instance, via others: “[T]rue harmony does not come to anyone who en-

47 Hejdánek, L., “K rozhovorům o J. L. Hromádkovi”, p. 207–229 (215).

48 Hejdánek, L., *Dopisy příteli II.*, ALH 1978, dopis č. 2 (23).

49 *Ibid.*

50 Compare PP, p. 366: “The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person. Everyone longs for a little human dignity, for moral integrity, for free experience of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence.”

deavours to attain it for himself ..., but only to one who endeavours towards harmony for others, even at the price of disharmony, conflicts, tensions and anxieties for himself."⁵¹ It must rather concern a serious sidelining of the self, as testified by an emphasis on the surrender of one's *freedom and life*. This connects chiefly to the very fact that it is not possible to comprehend the truth promoted by Hejdánek as contemplated (privately) by an individual or hidden within one's inner being and introspectively perceived, to see the emphasis on *solidarity with the servants of truth*, i.e. solidarity with those living here and now, again also as a reference to history and the situation in which we find ourselves and in which it is necessary to act: "[I]t is necessary really to do something, not only to adopt an attitude, which will be internally comfortable and morally clean."⁵² The same is true in the case of freedom. It is indivisible; either everyone has it or nobody does: "There is no peace on Earth while there are oppressed people: we can't really be free if our neighbours suffer violence."⁵³

Refusing an orientation towards the self (subject) stems from the fact that it is not possible to seek any more resistant meaning within the framework of objective thought but only in life understood in a broad sense, in "living through a deep integration with that which surrounds us".⁵⁴ It is primarily the future that fundamentally belongs to us, and only in accordance with this is it possible to seek or perceive a genuine sense of "our" life, whether within the framework of a time scale that represents our personal past and future, or within the framework of a social level that represents the nation, state and other human beings and societies, including their common history and future prospects, or within a cosmological framework that represents the Earth and the entire universe. According to Hejdánek, then, Havel and similar thinkers are the victims of objectified thought, and in non-objectified matters (e.g. God) cannot see anything other than illusions. As a result, for example, Havel specifically gains the conviction that "a man can find the answer to the question regarding the meaning of everything only in himself" and that God, the ultimate horizon, "has somehow strangely shifted into a certain deeper realm of his soul".⁵⁵ In other words, the relationship of responsibility cannot be reduced to the self and the person to whom I relate (as Hejdánek locates in Havel). In the case of regular responsibility, and thus also motivation, there are four essential poles: I, the responsible agent (e.g. a parent); instances to which I am responsible (e.g. God); the person for

51 Hejdánek, L., *Variace a reflexe na témata vězeňských dopisů Václava Havla*, p. 8.

52 Hejdánek, L., *Dopisy přáteli II.*, dopis č. 2 (23).

53 Hejdánek, L., *Dopisy přáteli II.*, dopis č. 3 (24).

54 Hejdánek, L., *Variace a reflexe na témata vězeňských dopisů Václava Havla*, p. 12–13.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

whom I am responsible (e.g. children); that for which I am responsible (e.g. upbringing). Only in this fourfold reduction of the “self” does the individual go “beyond the self”.⁵⁶ In real responsibility we abandon our subjectivity and answer to something whose basis is neither by us nor in us.⁵⁷

In a same spirit of rejection of subjectivism, spiritualism and psychologism, Hejdněk, in a critical reading of Havel’s letters from prison,⁵⁸ rejects the playwright’s (poetical-literary) “intuitive” approach, residing in an engagement with a tide of emotions and internal contemplations, as sufficient to address the social situation or to gain recognition and meaning in life. Feelings and emotions are firstly to be mastered, and man has to stop being drawn into them, i.e. they mustn’t be decisive in life and thinking.⁵⁹ Havel connects the tide of emotions (even romantically, impossibly or paradoxically) to a desire for *definitiveness*,⁶⁰ whereas Hejdněk, by contrast, in a reflexive, considered philosophical approach, stresses their *indefinite* nature: “We live in a time of great political and social transformations, and it mostly escapes us that the greatest earthquakes and shifts take place on the level of opinions, thought and methods of consideration ... If the endeavour towards a final statement and pregnant formulation has no chance, it is necessary to apply other criteria, thus a high intensity of criticism ... The best results are attained when it turns against itself.”⁶¹

As well as rejecting feelings, Hejdněk also rejects thought itself, or he distinguishes between open and closed thought. Man is “born” only in the outrightness that Hejdněk explains as a reflection in which the human meets the “non-existent” (challenges, ideas) and so revives or even consti-

56 Ibid.

57 Hejdněk, L., *Dopisy příteli II.*, dopis č. 2 (23).

58 Havel wrote these letters (1979–1982) right after writing “The Power of the Powerless” (1978).

59 Hejdněk, L., *Dopisy příteli III.*, dopis č. 2 (42).

60 In “The Power of the Powerless” there is a certain definitiveness in the extremism of the solution to the crisis described: the refusal of parliamentary democracy responds to the refusal of its continuous crisis (indefinitiveness). If people really start to live authentically, free of politics and similar “imperfect conquests”, then there will be good times once and for all, though it is mere vision – utopia. In other words, confrontation with the area of the prepolitical – between life within the truth and life within the lie – post-totalitarian regime is the wrong solution on the political level, and for Havel this social clash (a clash, let us say, between spiritual people orientated to truth and people orientated to the life of consumption) also relates to the political level: he also wants once and for all to decide it, by which he unambiguously adds truth on the side of life’s intentions. Nevertheless, the intentions of the system belong to life too, and we cannot clip them off by calling them “life within the lie”. Conversely, we cannot say that the fundamental pillar of the post-totalitarian system is greengrocers who put up the poster, that “there are no terms whatsoever on which [their lives] can co-exist with living within the truth” (PP, p. 368). The fundamental pillars were militiamen and officials of the Party. And the greengrocer, or the individual who goes along with the system, can coexist with living within the truth. See PP, sections X–XI and here note 28.

61 Hejdněk, L., *Člověk a otázka. Podoby*, Praha, ČS 1967, p. 129–141 (139–140).

tutes herself as integrated with truth (ideas): “[H]uman outrightness does not blend with her subjectivity, with her consciousness and thought. Subjectivity might be a by-product, an accompaniment of action ..., it might be only an awareness of what is happening and what is only taken note of. This acknowledgement itself has nothing else in common with truth than any other existent reality. It is still only the psychological level.”⁶² Havel remains within this level. In comparison to him, we should ascend to a higher level, where we will not relate to all kinds of things but rather to the “thing as it should be”, or to a truth that is different to that residing in rules, morals and laws. This level is reached by critical thought effort and by the development of new structures (of reflection) and constitution of the philosophical situation. Within the scope of these, the human might succeed in putting the question and thus outrightly to “go out of the self and organize herself in a way that is not exclusively dependent on psychological stuff, but which is impossible to derive from any other kind of givenness”. Thus, through the thought effort of reflection the human reaches the truth, or truth “asserts itself in the middle of subjectivity, because during the questioning is the human opened to something that is not here, that is not given (existent), but might come up to and address a man who listens”. Only philosophical reflection provides the two things that absolutely and in no way warrant the “subjective image of an objective situatedness of man”. First, it reveals the falsity or inauthenticity of intuitions. Second, it puts the true intuitions into life, explicates and presently enforces them here and now. Because of this, Hejdánek might say that “reflection is practice ..., by which all other activity only may become practice, may be detected as a practice and so as a way of humanization of human and of her world”; only in reflection does man “enter on the level of humanity and become a human being”, that is, “she alone comes into the question and looks into the answer to herself”. Reflection is not the only intellectual achievement by far, but is “an expression of the actual being of man”; without it, man does not exist (she does not stand out from the self and so does not expose herself to the truth), that is, she does not humanise herself, does not open herself to the “normativity of this, what weighs and judges her, accepts or rejects her, what confesses to her or reveals her nothingness and vanity”; she is not on the way of humanity, “which opens itself and goes further always again and again”. To return to Havel's “The Power of the Powerless”, living within the truth and fulfilling our freedom does not suffice, as in the case of the greengrocer who “begins to say what he really thinks”.⁶³ More is necessary: to bear witness to what addresses us (compare

62 Ibid., 139–141. All other quotations in this paragraph are from taken this article.

63 PP, p. 367.

the law of Moses, as mentioned above), to testify by our deeds here and now about the challenges (ideas) that we have reached in reflection.⁶⁴ The problem is not that individuals are “alienated from themselves” but that they are alienated from truth (“what should be”). Havel’s thesis that in individuals “there is something in them to alienate”⁶⁵ is not apt because – as he himself writes – humankind (and each human) is today in a crisis stemming from uprootedness. Modern society and the individuals within it are “spiritually uprooted or at least not anchored”. According to Hejdánek, the necessary “endeavour for a deep spiritual and moral anchoring” is characterised above all by a reflection on history, an accurate and integrated understanding of what is happening and what has led to this, and thus also by a criticism of the basis of an overall philosophical conviction and a consideration of the final source of all today’s beliefs.⁶⁶ The source cannot logically be in the depths of an individual’s soul and life, precisely because we ultimately find nothing there but this uprootedness and emptiness. The concentrated life of the individual is important, but only as a component of a historical, cultural, societal and philosophical process.

A necessarily deep life-rootedness or authenticity rests solely in reflection, in the complex understanding of what is going on (and thus also of the events that have led to this point and where events direct and might direct).⁶⁷ Havel, then, is doubtful about his firm belief in existent morality and his inclination to the modern human who nevertheless “emptied the future, made a vacuum of it. The future is a forthcoming vacuum that we are supposed to fill up with our deeds.”⁶⁸ Whereas Havel, all in all, appeals to the autonomous individual who has everything essential, including truth, at his command or even “in herself”,⁶⁹ Hejdánek appeals to the “non-given” (non-existent) but “substantial” – because of the many challenges to come – future, not to our intentions (the intentions of our lives) but to the intentions of the truth, which we first have to recognise and then realise in the present

64 We do not need the reflection here briefly described to associate only with some extraordinary achievement of the philosopher. This reflection belongs to the life of ordinary man. See, for example, one of its first descriptions in Ancient Greece: “Nor suffer sleep to close thine eyes / Till thrice thy acts that day thou hast run o’er; / How slipt? What deeds? What duty left undone?” Porphyry, *Vita Pyth.* 40 (transl. K. S. Guthrie).

65 PP, p. 369.

66 Hejdánek, L., “Masaryk a naše dnešní krize”, in Hejdánek, L., *Setkání a odstup*, p. 176–187 (182–183).

67 Hejdánek, L., “Masaryk a naše dnešní krize”, p. 182–183.

68 Hejdánek, L., *Lidská práva* (pro diskusi 12.3.1991), ALH.

69 Compare, for example, PP, p. 371: living within the truth, i.e., saying what we really have in mind, “takes individuals back to the solid ground of their own identity”.

conditions – even if these intentions are directed against our intentions. In other words, Hejdánek does not explain the crisis of the human world as existential but rather as a socially practical and ontological matter: he criticises the *reality* of social affairs, which have an ontologically cosmic impact.⁷⁰ The question is: what is *true reality*? This is posed as a part of a certain outline of reality; it means that it inquires about the human position in reality (universe). And just such a new view of reality, which forbids us from understanding humanity purely objectively, and nature as separated from humanity, should be the starting point to emerge from the crisis. True reality includes non-given (non-existent) but happening truth that, for its working in the here and now, needs the human and her deeds that arise from the address by this truth. Because of this, it is also crucial to distinguish between the “subjective” as a) “conscious” (human) and b) “creating new”, creating activity. Whereas Havel emphasises “the level of human consciousness and conscience”,⁷¹ for Hejdánek this is not enough – or is too much – and he demands activity that changes reality (which he finds already on the level of unconscious forms of life).

Some of the critiques presented in this paper may nevertheless be moderated by one fact. Hejdánek, as a philosopher, declares his allegiance to Havel as a writer, and stresses the dependence of philosophy on non-philosophical inspirations. Indeed, in this cooperation philosophy appears to him as “practical”:

But not even philosophy, which undermines its own foundations and systematically cuts away the branches upon which it rests (or has rested hitherto), does not find sufficient indicators by which to proceed. And here, either willingly or unwillingly, it must render itself to the services of those who through their intuitions are closer to reality than philosophy can ever be in its reflections. Intuitions may be shown to be erroneous or misleading – as philosophy well knows – but they may also be accurate and prophetic. Philosophy shall then adopt such intuitions and exert every endeavour in order to assist their application and enforcement.⁷²

70 Hejdánek, L., “Pravda a skutečnost”, in Hejdánek, L., *Setkání a odstup*, p. 24–30.

71 PP, p. 369. According to Havel, “the profound crisis of human identity [is] brought on by living within a lie” (PP, p. 371) – I do not doubt that this living in a lie and conformist way of life exacerbates the crisis, but the core of the crisis is somewhere else, is somehow more essential. And, as well as “the world of appearances” (PP, p. 370), it is part of every human life and it is not evil in itself.

72 Hejdánek, L., *Variace a reflexe na témata vězeňských dopisů Václava Havla*, p. 6.

Here I see also the most fundamental justification of Havel's swing to subjectivism, intuition or emotion: it is part of his "job description" as a dramatist and artist. The whole of Hejdánek's critique, which I have systematised here, is weakened by this fact; this critique only belongs to Havel's ambitions other than the non-political agency of the artist. If we read Havel's texts more as the texts of an artist, or as artistic texts, and do not look so much for their philosophical purpose, then they will paradoxically have more meaning and will be more useful – even for philosophers. I believe that this approach might apply even to Havel's so-called philosophical period,⁷³ because at the bottom he was always an artist, even when he could not practise his art and had to substitute it with philosophy or politics, which he was nevertheless not able to practise properly either (the philosopher cannot become an artist from day to day too).

To sum up, the link between the first and second part is clear: Havel's tendency towards radical existentialism (first part) includes an understanding of the intellectual in sharp contrast to all politics (second part). My swing towards the moderate existentialism in Havel's work (part one) is then supported by the fact that Hejdánek's subsequent critique, (parts two and three) does not so much relate to this. Moderate existentialism, on the contrary, accords well with the recognition of the special *political* role of the intellectual (part two) and with Hejdánek's concept of truth as a non-given challenge coming from the future (part three). Such a moderate existentialism also explains the development of a more objectivist and realist position in Hejdánek's spirit (third part) than does the idealism or radicalism that we encounter in Havel's "The Power of the Powerless" (though this is only one aspect of Havel's work). The critique of Havel in the second and third part is, in my opinion, the argument that Havel's vital and reasonable legacy lies in his understanding of a moderate version.⁷⁴

73 Havel was forced to start writing his philosophical essays. If there had been no totalitarian regime, he would have kept on writing plays. His philosophical or non-politically political essays should be understood as a substitute for his original calling, which was forbidden by the communist regime.

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