

# Václav Havel, Simone Weil and Our Desire for Totalitarianism

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## Abstract:

Given our troubled history in the 20th century, how is it that nationalism and populism have come to raise their heads again in Europe over the past 20 years? What have we lost? What is it about our liberal, democratic political structures that creates the current atmosphere of mistrust, xenophobia and shortsightedness? How has this development come about, and what is driving it? How should we understand this desire for authoritarianism?

In this paper, I will address these questions through a reading of two essays that can be considered to have been written as warning signs regarding a very common tendency within social psychology that entails a development of communities towards authoritarian structures. Simone Weil's essay "Human Personality", written in 1943 during her wartime exile in London, and Václav Havel's "The Power of the Powerless", written in 1978 during his house arrest in Czechoslovakia, both address the potential relapse of Europe into authoritarianism. Neither of these essays should be read as developed theories within political philosophy. They are notes from a dire predicament of crisis, on both a personal and a macro-political level, that investigate the relationship between the subject and society in order to understand the dynamics of totalitarianism. Their strength lies exactly in that they address a present unfolding situation that the authors perceive to have potentially unbearable consequences. This tone of urgency, their way of addressing us from a positionality void of any real power or privilege, and their bold demands for envisioning change beyond given political ideologies, make these essays into unique backdrops for thinking about our current political questions.

Both Weil and Havel advocate an open society that permits the subject to cultivate a form of life beyond collective ideology. Both essays address the sensibilities of the subject that do not appeal to identity, common ideology or collectivity in order to thrive. The aim of this paper is to outline this redefinition of the relation between the individual and society in Weil and Havel, as a remedy for our desire for authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism, belonging, collectivity, moral agency, Simone Weil

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*Power is a uniquely human situation. It affects both rulers and ruled, and threatens the health of both.*<sup>1</sup>

Ludvik Vaculík

## Introduction

I will address the questions concerning the nature of the socio-psychological dynamics that pull us towards authoritarian systems through four steps.

In the first part, I will articulate Václav Havel's warning. Based on the philosophy of Jan Patočka, Havel outlines how a new form of totalitarianism builds on ideological indoctrination through circumscribing our understanding of lived life experience, rather than through forceful and explicit repression. As a remedy for this development, Havel advocates the cultivation of a dissident movement that builds on a plurality of ideological forces that find their common ground in appeals for a society that prioritises the dignity of each unique life-project.

The second part addresses a problem concerning the notion of dissidence. If by dissidence we refer to any contrarian movement that aims at replacing one form of political system with another, then all kinds of authoritarian movements will also fall under this category. I bring in the example of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán who constantly challenges liberal values in European politics, by appealing to a plurality of values. I show how his rhetoric builds on a paradox. In order to defend the authoritarian measures that his regime actively maintains in Hungary – oppressing minorities, limiting the possibilities of open dialogue and free speech, closing down universities, limiting the sphere of artistic and cultural expression, and silencing political opponents – Orbán appeals to the sovereign right of Hungary to determine its own political values, within a plurality of European values. This kind of push from authoritarian movements, within liberal democracies, easily amounts to a pull towards totalitarianism. As a remedy for this paradox of the open society, I will analyse how this tension builds on a certain blindness concerning agency. How can Orbán claim that Hungarian values are subjugated by global liberalism, while he, as the prime minister, is instrumental in oppressing minorities in Hungary? What is the nature of this blindness?

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<sup>1</sup> Ludvik Vaculík, as quoted in Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 153.

In the third part, I will answer this question by bringing in Simone Weil, and her warning concerning the potential aftermath of the German occupation of France during the Second World War. Weil's treatise reveals that the reason why subjects, and institutions, easily become blind to their own agency resides within subjective psychology and affectivity. Weil shows how there is something within our desires for establishing collectivity through identity and power that drives us towards self-blindness. By establishing a dialogue between Weil and Havel, I will show that they both are concerned that if political life becomes a task of heeding a certain given totalising order, the potential outcome is a common loss of our sense of moral agency. The important point of agreement between Havel and Weil is that they appeal to a sense of meaning and belonging that does not depend on the unity, and identity of ideology and life form. The remedy for uprootedness and alienation, for them, is not a certain set political and societal order, but rather a moral sensibility: the ability to cultivate an understanding for what a dignified life entails, beyond a set order with distinguishable criteria. Through this acceptance of contingency, and open-endedness, subjective agency may be revitalised.

This introduces a further question that I will address in the final part: how can we have communities without a collective? Or, to put it differently, is there a benevolent form of collectivity that lacks this notion of identity and subjugation to an ideological power? Weil speaks of a "warmth" in our social life that is needed in order for us not to fall into the vicious form of collectivity. She advocates relationships built on attention and love, which acknowledge the vulnerability of the other. She distinguishes between the juridical concept of rights and the moral concept of justice. Her thoughts resonate with Havel's appeal to a dignified human life. This ethos, common to both Weil and Havel, that builds on moral perception rather than ideology, identity and rule following, resides beyond the discourses of political power. The dynamics of power means that belongingness in a community always takes the form of submersion, i.e. the compromising of one's subjective agency for the gain of conformity. Both Weil and Havel show how this involves an ailing form of belongingness. For them, true belonging implies an acceptance of the plurality and contingency of human experience. Through this reading of Weil and Havel, I aim to show that our sense of community and belonging are based on our propensity for moral perception rather than on authoritarian values of a common ideology and identity.

## Havel and the hidden aims of life

How should we understand the origins of our desire for authoritarianism? In Václav Havel's "The Power of the Powerless" we can find some potential answers to this question. Although Havel's text was written in 1978 and should be understood in the context of a specific development within the relations between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, it points at a broader evolution of Europe that still reverberates within our current political discourses. As a critique, it is not solely aimed at the Soviet Union or the communist form of totalitarianism; Havel also points a finger at the liberal West. He articulates two specific reasons for the success of what he calls "post-totalitarianism":

1. A lack of alternatives and political layers: the dynamics of polis and parallel polis have been lost.
2. The conformity of our liberal democracies creates a desire for authoritarianism.

Havel addresses a shift from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism, the latter being a political structure that refrains from forceful indoctrination of its subjects. Rather, post-totalitarianism aims at circumscribing our understanding of lived life experience in order for the subjects to wilfully succumb to a totalitarian social order:

Ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life. It pretends that the requirements of the system derive from the requirements of life. It is a world of appearances trying to pass as reality. [...] The arbitrary abuse of power is called observing the legal code; the repression of culture is called its development; the expansion of imperial influence is presented as support for the oppressed; the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, a self-governed form of totalitarianism is established. The lack of alternatives, the unification of ideology and the uniformity of life-projects, creates fertile ground for the subjects to impose the rules and ideology of the governing political order on themselves. The post-totalitarian society should not be seen as a political structure that has transcended totalitarianism;

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2 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless". *International Journal of Politics*, 15, Fall–Winter 1985–1986, No. 3/4, p. 30.

rather, it entails a new form in which the totalising order generates itself, in opposition to an open society in which personal development can take different forms that do not adhere to a unified ideology. Havel writes: “By pulling everyone into its power structure, the post-totalitarian system makes everyone an instrument of a mutual totality, the auto-totally of society.”<sup>3</sup> This entails an order in which a clear-cut division between those who inflict power and those who are powerless is muddled. The line between the subjugating power and the subjugated runs through each and every individual, whether we are talking about the prime minister or a small shopkeeper.<sup>4</sup>

Havel opposes the idea that a functioning society that provides its subjects with a sense of belonging would be founded on a homogeneous form of life, shared identity and common ideals. When Havel formulates his arguments in support of the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1970s, the problem for him is not the lack of unified ideas about politics and values, since, in his understanding, the desire for unification carries the seed of totalitarianism within itself. Instead, he talks about our need to live a truthful and dignified life – an experience of our life as an open-ended project – in contradiction to constricting authoritarianism and a shared ideology.

For Havel and the Czech dissident movement, this emphasis on dignity did not spring from political theory but from the influence of phenomenological and existential philosophy, via philosophers such as Jan Patočka.<sup>5</sup> In the same vein, Merleau-Ponty writes: “Someone will say: it is through a relation to a project. If you like, but there is a non-decisionary project, not chosen, [an] intention without subject: living.”<sup>6</sup> If we agree that a dignified life has this open-ended character, then the strife of unifying our life-projects should be understood as a potential problem, at least if the unification becomes too extensive and minimises the space for a plurality of life-projects – even projects that do not have a given end. In a certain rationalistic and utilitarian conception of politics, all our projects are understood as consisting of actions that are means defined by a given goal. This understanding leaves us with a view of politics as a deterministic system, “like a collection of traffic signals and directional signs, giving the process shape and structure”.<sup>7</sup> Havel builds his critical perspective on the idea that there are modalities of our experience that go beyond this means-to-an-end structure. There are “hidden

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3 Ibid., p. 37.

4 Ibid.

5 See, Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 26–27.

6 Merleau-Ponty, M., *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France 1954–1955*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press 2010, p. 6.

7 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 32.

aims of life” that do not manifest themselves as goal-driven but rather as expectations of a dignified life.<sup>8</sup>

This aspect of our experience – that to some extent our actions and intentions lack a clear understanding of a defined end – is hardly integrated into our political discourses. Nevertheless, it is exactly this contingency of life that Havel, time after time, holds on to as an inspiration for the utopia of an open society. And it is this open-endedness that constantly poses a threat to totalitarian systems. Havel’s teacher and intellectual inspiration, Jan Patočka, notes:

Man is such a force, controllable from without as well as from within: take care of his economic security, give him a place within the mass self-consciousness, organize his mind with propaganda and his recreation and entertainment with the appropriate measures, and he will belong to you completely, and he will even think that he is free and that all of this is the authentic realization of Man.<sup>9</sup>

This is similar to Havel’s critique of liberalism, which articulates how the conformity provided by liberal democracies may also cater to totalitarian goals. Patočka goes on to claim that there always is a part of the subject that can detect this false liberty; he calls it the “inner core”.<sup>10</sup> Even when living in a totalising order there is something within us that can experience openings, a freedom that permits our judgement and understanding to stretch beyond the encompassing order. By cultivating this notion of freedom, the Czech dissidents aimed to change the political structures by establishing ruptures in the totalising order. The historian Jonathan Bolton describes this tactic: “They can cross against the light and walk on the grass, reinterpreting restrictions to make them more amenable to their personal projects; they cocreate the contours of their lives, rather than passively accepting dictates from above.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Havel, there is a natural tension between the polis and the parallel polis – the individual and the prevailing ideological system – that is beneficial for our sense of belonging. This tension is the vitalising force of politics. When this tension subsides, it creates political disillusion and stagnation. Even a totalitarian system has to appeal to the substructure of lived experience in order to keep up an appearance of legitimacy: the Soviet proj-

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8 Ibid., p. 42.

9 Patočka, J., *Living in Problematicity*. Prague, Oikoymenh Karolinum Press 2020, p. 47.

10 Ibid., p. 49.

11 Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 26–27.

ect appealed to the experience of the working class; national socialism appealed to both national identity and the working class (it was, after all, called socialism); today's populists appeal to cultural identity, rootedness and fatherland. All in order to show that the ideology aspiring to totalitarianism is speaking from the perspective of subjective experience. When this tension between personal life, which strives towards dignity and truth, and the ideological order is suspended – when the ideological order becomes near-equivalent to personal understanding of lived experience – the post-totalitarian system is established.

Another aspect of the dynamics that drives the subject towards authoritarianism is alienation. In Havel's view, inspired by Patočka, it stems from grasping onto false or illusory remedies for the uncertainties of life, i.e. alienation does not stem directly from the challenges of the uncertainties or contingencies of life, but rather from a false sense of security provided by ideology.<sup>12</sup> This is not to be read only as a specific case study of events in 1970s Czechoslovakia, but rather as a warning sign: a reminder of a vicious circle empowered by our common desire for authoritarianism. Havel writes:

When people are being uprooted and alienated and are losing their sense of what this world means, this ideology inevitably has a certain hypnotic charm. To wandering humankind it offers an immediately available home: all one has to do is accept it, and suddenly everything becomes clear once more, life takes on new meaning, and all mysteries, unanswered questions, anxiety, and loneliness vanish. Of course, one pays dearly for this low-rent home.<sup>13</sup>

The wandering nature of man can in this way become negotiable; the promise of a clear order may outweigh the freedom and creative nature of the subject. What is lost here is the possibility to comprehend other ways of life. Other paths and directions become hardly imaginable. The possibility to create new paths and directions for one's life-projects requires at least some room for, and tolerance of, uncertainty and open-endedness. This challenge entails that the community finds unity without falling back on any conception of a given order and finds new possibilities from this open-endedness.<sup>14</sup> Without this tension between the ideological order and the reflective and wandering subject, totalitarianism gains a foothold.

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<sup>12</sup> See Patočka, J., *Living in Problematicity*, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless", p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> See Patočka, J., *Living in Problematicity*, p. 56.

This invites the question of alienation, since, if Havel is right, it is a kind of natural state for the subject not to know or understand their place in the world completely. In a totalising order, the loss of clearly defined goals and contours of life becomes acute and problematic, and drives the individual even deeper into subjugation. Both Havel and Patočka try to point out another path of embracing the uncertainty and contingency that inevitably is an aspect of our lives. Thus, alienation is not constituted by the uncertainties and contingencies of life. Rather, alienation is brought about by the illusory sense of order and control, which totalising ideological systems advocate as remedies to the inevitable uncertainties that we are bound to encounter. Both Patočka and Havel advocate a societal order that is supportive of individual growth and agency, and both point a finger of warning at the illusory comfort provided by totalising ideologies.

This distinction between the movement towards a unity of ideology and life form, and the movement towards an open society that enables its subjects to pursue personal and unique life-projects and freedom of thought, provides a partial answer to the challenge of authoritarianism. In a time of crisis, we are psychologically inclined to seek the remedy for our alienation and uprootedness in strictly defined rules and order. This move towards authoritarianism is what Havel and Patočka point out as the dangerous route that will take us to (post-)totalitarianism.

However, this is not the whole story. There are some intricacies here that need to be addressed, since authoritarian movements do also appeal to a certain conception of freedom, and historically many of them also start out as contrarian and critical movements that stand in opposition to the established order. The notion of the dissident who opposes and questions a prevailing order is in many ways a quite neutral term. As I will show in the next part, this notion of the dissident is vague in the sense that even authoritarian political movements build on a certain expression of dissent. Jonathan Bolton points out this ambiguity: “In February 1979, Zdeněk Mlynář – an architect of the Prague Spring reform movement in 1968, who was later expelled from the Party and helped formulate the human-rights proclamation Charter 77 – wrote: ‘The term “dissident” is one of the least precise in the contemporary political vocabulary.’”<sup>15</sup> Bolton describes how Western historians projected several narratives onto the dissident movement. He notes that none of these, however, work as an exhaustive description, since Charter 77 was unique in the sense that it included several different political ideas and strategies.<sup>16</sup> The main goal was not to replace one political order with another, but rather to

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15 Bolton, J., *Worlds of Dissent*, p. 2.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 24ff.

infuse several expressions and forms of communal life within the oppressing regime. Václav Benda, who coined the term “parallel polis”, saw the goal in establishing parallel structures “that would supplement the broken institutions of the regime”.<sup>17</sup> The distinction here is essential, as I will show, since it reveals the ambiguity of the concept of dissent. In the context of Charter 77 it does not simply signify contrarianism or opposition to the regime, but rather an embracing of ambiguity and plurality. It is a tool for decentralisation.

### The authoritarian paradox

We could, with Havel, ask: who are the dissidents of today?<sup>18</sup> One uncomfortable answer to this question is that it is the populists and nationalists who claim to be working in opposition to the political mainstream of liberal globalism. In other words, it is the powers on the far right that claim to be in opposition to a current totalising order. I am not claiming that the far right are dissidents in the sense that Havel uses the term, since there is something that does not ring true with that statement, due to the distinction I mentioned above. However, it seems quite clear that many right-wing populists who appeal to authoritarianism sincerely experience themselves to be dissidents. We might call their self-proclaimed dissident status a bluff. But for them it is not a bluff. They build their personas around contrarianism, right-mindedness, honour and opposition to the prevailing forces: the elite, the globalists, the multiculturalists, the feminists, the cultural Marxists, the environmental movement, Zionism, the liberals, the queer, that is, in opposition to whatever they believe to be the current political ideology in power. They conceive of themselves as the righteous who stand up against an order that suppresses their true way of life.

There is a certain irony in this. People who drive authoritarian, nationalistic and totalitarian goals in a supposedly liberal democracy appeal to their right to express themselves freely and their right to drive their common political agendas publicly. As long as they do not understand the irony of the paradox of the open society, their understanding of themselves as dissidents will prevail. However, what I have aimed to show in my reading of Havel and Patočka so far is that there is something within the common dynamics of political power per se that easily caters to movements towards authoritarianism. They both point out a circular movement within the politics of power that regenerates totalitarian tendencies. If the dissident solely aims at toppling one political order and replacing it with another, this kind

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 23.

of contrariness is applicable as a description of the rise of some of the most authoritarian societies, as well as of many social struggles for a more decent and plural society.

One thing that should be clear is that even nationalists and populists who appeal to strong authoritarian politics require some kind of understanding of the dynamics between individual freedom and ideological order. Paradoxically, even authoritarian movements have to appeal to freedom and plurality, at least to some extent. In order to clarify this, I want to bring in a recent example.

On 11 September 2018, the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, gave a speech in the European Parliament, in which he defended Hungary's position and criticised the proceedings under way to strip Hungary of its voting rights.<sup>19</sup> The European initiative was based on a report by Dutch Green MEP Judith Sargentini. The report disclosed that Hungary was not complying with the values of the European Union (EU), and thus the question of revoking Hungary's voting rights was brought to the parliamentary floor.

Since 2012, Orbán had instigated a “constitutional counter-revolution” through which the constitution of Hungary was fundamentally renegotiated.<sup>20</sup> The political consequences included restrictions on immigration and heavily circumscribed constitutional rights for minorities. For the European Parliament, this signalled an escalating “crisis of values”.<sup>21</sup>

Orbán's speech was given on the eve of the parliamentary vote.<sup>22</sup> He begins by describing Hungary as a defender of European liberal and democratic values. He refers to the fight against communism and the historical wars in which the people of Hungary shed their blood to protect the nation and the rest of Europe. However, what is interesting for the context of the dynamics of authoritarianism is that Orbán goes on to speak about how the EU, by virtue of its liberal-democratic values, should be able to contain differing opinions, ideologies and political systems. Orbán defends Hungary's restrictive immigration laws, and circumscribed constitutional rights, by appealing to plurality and liberalism: “If we mean that we want Europe to be unified in diversity, this reason cannot be to brand any of the countries and for it to be excluded from joint decisions. We would never go as far as silencing those who disagree with us.”<sup>23</sup>

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19 The speech is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oqhwwPj5mo>.

20 See Mos, M., “Ambiguity and interpretive politics in the crisis of European values: Evidence from Hungary”. *East European Politics*, 36, 2020, No. 2, p. 4.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

22 On 12 September 2018 the vote was held and resulted in 448 against 197 voting for sanctions against Hungary.

23 My transcription from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oqhwwPj5mo>.

Here, Orbán speaks from the perspective of the dissident. Hungary and the governing Fidesz party, of which he is the leader, are the victims of the repression of the globalist agenda of the EU. Hungary is the dissident in the totalitarian project of the EU. The irony mentioned above is highly present in Orbán's self-understanding. If the rule of the European Parliament means restricting Hungary's right to have differing ideological values set in place by the constitutional counter-revolution, Orbán appeals to plurality and liberal values, values that he, as the prime minister of Hungary, has attacked viciously during three terms in office. Martijn Mos writes:

When labeled an autocrat, Orbán cited his electoral track record and his use of national consultations; when accused of violating LGBT rights, he noted the Union's obligation to respect Hungary's constitutional identity; when charged with undermining the rule of law, he reminded his critics of the subsidiarity principle; and when urged to show solidarity during the migrant crisis, the Prime Minister claimed his country's restrictive policies were an act of solidarity toward the other member states.<sup>24</sup>

In this way, the strategy of the authoritarian does not build singularly on authoritarian rhetorics. Even Orbán understands that he needs the notions of plurality, democracy and liberty in order to successfully manoeuvre the political project of Fidesz. This split between Orbán the authoritarian, and Orbán the prime minister who appeals to democracy and plurality echoes Havel's sentiment about a post-totalitarian order in which the line between the oppressor and the oppressed runs within the singular subject, whether it is a shopkeeper or the prime minister. Even the authoritarian leader is subjugated to the tension between the ideological order and personal (or national) freedom. The contradiction in Orbán's sentiment is that he speaks simultaneously from the perspective of power and the perspective of the powerless.

We could claim that the philosophical job is done by pointing out the paradox in Orbán's claims. Quite clearly, there is a self-blindness in his appeal to democracy and the principles of an open society. Alternatively, Orbán is not blind at all, but is simply using a strategy of double standards quite intentionally to achieve his authoritarian goals. Whatever the case, this shows the complexity in the question of the appeal of authoritarianism. Even when the apparent paradox of driving authoritarian aims by appealing to democracy is brought into view, it does not dissolve the authoritarian project.<sup>25</sup> As Ben-

24 Mos, M., "Ambiguity and interpretive politics in the crisis of European values", p. 14.

25 Some argue that this strategy of using double standards even fortifies the populist movements; see Mos, M., "Ambiguity and interpretive politics in the crisis of European values".

jamin Ask Popp-Madsen notes, Orbán's manoeuvre amounts to a split within the institution of the EU, and so the question that arises is:

How much political disagreement can exist *in* a democracy before such disagreements become disagreements *about* democracy? Is the normative ideal of liberal democracy being threatened by “illiberal democracies,” such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary, and/or by “undemocratic liberalism,” such as the market-oriented politics of the European Union?<sup>26</sup>

When reading “The Power of the Powerless” we find that Havel foresaw the importance of the question of this ambiguity. It is a central characteristic of the definition of the post-totalitarian system that the people who inhabit such a society develop a certain blindness towards their own agency in creating and supporting the system. Orbán's persona seems to be split in a fundamental way. On the one hand, as the prime minister of Hungary he is a key agent in oppressing minorities, limiting the possibilities for open dialogue and free speech, closing down universities, limiting the sphere of artistic and cultural expression, and silencing his political opponents. On the other hand, on behalf of Hungary he claims to be oppressed and silenced by the totalising order of liberal globalism.

Despite the apparent contradiction in Orbán's message, he is able to threaten the democratic order from within, since this same split is potentially generated in the encompassing institutional order of the EU. By aiming to bar Hungary from the decision-making process of the European Parliament, the EU also becomes potentially smitten by authoritarianism. As Mos points out, the strategy of the European Parliament, which imposes a hardline policy on member states, and which pressures them to comply with a defined set of values, “may limit the interpretive wiggle room that politicians have. As definitions, indicators and benchmarks proliferate, fundamental values become less abstract.”<sup>27</sup> Through this dynamic, the space for pluralism and ambiguity grows smaller within the union, due to the pressure from authoritarian movements. The strategy to exclude or isolate authoritarian member states might be necessary in order to protect institutional democratic values, but this aim also reveals the vulnerability of the open society.

If the pressure from authoritarianism always leads to limitations within the democratic order, this seems to entail an unresolvable clinch. As I have

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26 Popp-Madsen, B. A., “Review essay: Should we be afraid? Liberal democracy, democratic backsliding, and contemporary populism”. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 19, 2020, p. 161.

27 Mos, M., “Ambiguity and interpretive politics in the crisis of European values”, p. 14.

shown, the problem here does not solely stem from the explicit and intentional form of authoritarian movements. The tendency of democracies to move towards authoritarianism is driven by conflicts that push democratic institutions to limit the interpretational frameworks of their values. In this way, the project of the open society easily becomes sidetracked. We can, like Orbán, eagerly point out the wrongs done to us and the repression we are subjected to, but we fall short when we are pressed to formulate an alternative as to how a pluralistic and open-ended political society is to be established. The reason for this is that ambiguity is in itself an aspect of an open-ended society. The temptation to rid our political order of ambiguity caters to the vicious circle of post-totalitarianism, since any vagueness can, at least seemingly, be remedied by a stricter order and more authoritarian measures. In this way, the very characteristics of plurality and ambiguity of an open-ended society are at the same time its vulnerable point. Havel writes:

While life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self-organization, in short, towards the fulfillment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline. While life ever strives to create new and improbable structures, the post-totalitarian system contrives to force life into its most probable states.<sup>28</sup>

In this sense, an open society cannot be established through uniformity and discipline, or, to put it another way, it cannot be *established* at all, since all appeals to a new establishment potentially cater to new forms of authoritarianism. The opposite of totalitarianism is a society that permits the unpredictability contained by parallel structures, subcultures and alternative ways of life. And as long as we do not find it in ourselves to embrace this ambiguity, we will potentially fall back into the temptations of authoritarianism.

It was this embrace of ambiguity that was the driving force behind the Charter 77 movement, in which Havel played an important role. This was a loosely knit community of artists, punk rockers, playwrights, former communists and philosophers with the common aim of responding to the communist regime. The tenacity to act, respond and enter into dialogue with the regime was not solely a strategy of contrarianism and opposition. More importantly, its aim was to regain a certain agency of the subject. Patočka, who became one of Charter 77's main intellectual figures, saw it as a Socra-

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28 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless", p. 29–30.

tic political movement. Eric Manton writes: “He emphasized that Charter 77 was not a typical political act, it was not an organization nor an association, but rather based on individuals upholding their sense of duty, their ‘obligation to speak out of himself – which is his obligation to his society as well’.”<sup>29</sup> Their message was not based on any specific political ideological framework, but rather was rooted in a revitalisation of everyday human experience. The main aim of Charter 77 could, in this sense, be understood as a regaining of an understanding of subjective agency in the post-totalitarian order.

The pivotal question here is: what are the characteristics of the kind of blindness towards one’s own agency that authoritarianism generates in the subject? This is a complicated question, since it has to be addressed on many levels. It is a matter for political history and philosophy, for sociology and even for anthropology and psychology. However, as Havel shows, the reason why subjects, and institutions, easily become blind to their own agency resides within subjective psychology and affectivity. There is something within our desires that drives us towards this self-blindness. It is easy to think of our moral and political life as constituted by a certain given order, which is established by a certain set of rules. But, as I will show by establishing a dialogue between Weil and Havel, there is something that gets lost in this perspective. When political life becomes a task of heeding a certain given order, the potential outcome is that we lose our sense of agency. What is common to both Weil and Havel is that they acknowledge this threat.

### **Weil on belonging and roots (without identity)**

A warning concerning the loss of meaning and agency, can be found in Simone Weil’s essay *The Need for Roots*, written in 1943 during Weil’s wartime exile in London. As Rush Rhee points out, the text is not a description of the war but a warning about its potential aftermath. He describes Weil’s concern as: “How France can be brought alive again – How it can start a new life after the German occupation.”<sup>30</sup> Weil writes:

Don’t let us imagine that being worn out, all they will ask for is a comfortable existence. Nervous exhaustion caused by some recent misfortune makes it impossible for those concerned to settle down to enjoy a comfortable existence. It forces people to seek forgetfulness, sometimes in a

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29 Manton, E., “The Political Philosophy of a Non-Political Philosopher”, in Patočka, J., *Living in Problematicity*, p. 77.

30 Rhee, R., *Discussions of Simone Weil*. Albany, SUNY Press 2000, p. 40.

dizzy round of exhausted enjoyment – as was the case in 1918 – at other times in some dark and dismal fanaticism. When misfortune bites too deeply, it creates a disposition towards misfortune, which makes people plunge headlong into themselves dragging others along with them.<sup>31</sup>

Weil is concerned that the hardships of the war will create a vicious circle, fed by our desire for authoritarianism in a situation in which we are at a loss concerning our sense of meaning. Like Havel, she sees a danger in the loss of our sense of rootedness, since this kind of emotional distress may lead people to grasp onto illusory remedies and a false sense of belonging. Weil's emphasis is, however, different from Havel's, in that she does not believe that a comfortable existence will appeal to the generations that have lost their rootedness. Rather, the uprooted will be attracted either by hedonistic desires, which help the subject to forget the past, or by political fanaticism and authoritarianism.

The important point of agreement here is that neither Havel nor Weil advocate any return to a strong sense of identity, or unity in ideology, as a way out of the loss of a sense of meaning and rootedness. Rather, they both appeal to a sense of meaning and rootedness that does not depend on the unity and identity of ideology and life form. The remedy for uprootedness, for them, is not a certain set political and societal order, but rather a moral sensibility, the ability to cultivate an understanding for what a dignified life entails, beyond a set order with distinguishable criteria.

There is one detail here that still needs articulation. When we talk about rootedness, as an important existential value for society, it does seem to appeal to some sense of stability and order. On the one hand, we have a human need for freedom, ambiguity and an open society. On the other hand, we also need guidelines, common values and a sense of a shared foundational understanding. How do these two human needs meet without conflict? One of the elucidating articulations of this tension can be found in Weil's essay "Human Personality":

Relations between the collectivity and the person should be arranged with the sole purpose of removing whatever is detrimental to the growth and mysterious germination of the impersonal element of the soul.

– This, means, on the one hand, that for every person there should be enough room, enough freedom to plan the use of one's time, the opportu-

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31 Weil, S., *The Need for Roots*. London, Routledge 2002, p. 92–93.

nity to reach ever higher levels of attention, some solitude, some silence. At the same time the person needs warmth, lest it be driven by distress to submerge itself in the collective.<sup>32</sup>

In Weil's sentiment, an important distinction runs between the personal and impersonal aspects of the subject. A society that permits the subject to cultivate the impersonal – the modality in us that does not need to appeal to identity, common ideology or collectivity in order to thrive – could perhaps withstand the desire for authoritarianism. In order to understand what Weil means by “impersonal”, it is important to note that the term does refer to something foundational in our moral psychology that is not reducible to empirical characteristics or qualities that are *identifiable* or comparable with other qualities.<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas writes about the “human face” in a similar manner:

Ordinarily one is a “character”: a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son so-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. [...] Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. [...] It is what cannot become content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond.<sup>34</sup>

What both Weil and Levinas are getting at, in their different ways, is that our moral relations rely on something beyond that which can be identified as certain qualities or characteristics, the ways in which a certain person can be identified and compared to other persons. Christopher Hamilton describes this as the propensity for goodness in the subject, “which bypasses all interest in the empirical characteristics of a human being”.<sup>35</sup> The impersonal is, in this sense, something that grants the subject a relation with the other, despite one's own preconceptions, expectations and interests.

This reverberates with Patočka's notion of the “inner core” that was mentioned earlier. In Weil and Patočka we find an emphasis on the human *spirit* that is hard to reconcile with political language. And in Havel we find a similar emphasis when he talks about human dignity as a core value for a healthy society. Although the term “spirit” easily leads to mystical connotations,

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32 Weil, S., “Human Personality” [1943], in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, edited by Siân Miles. London, Penguin Books 2005, p. 79.

33 Hamilton, C., “Simone Weil's ‘Human Personality’: Between the Personal and the Impersonal”. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 98, 2005, No. 2, p. 192.

34 Levinas, E. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press 1985, p. 86–87.

35 Hamilton, C., “Simone Weil's ‘Human Personality’”, p. 193.

I think we can find a quite ordinary use of the term that emphasises the quality of the agency by which an act is performed. Dignity and dissidence are terms that aim to describe *the spirit in which* certain acts are performed. Havel notes: “They may be teachers who privately teach young people things that are kept from them in the state schools; clergymen who either in office or, if they are deprived of their charges, outside it, try to carry on a free religious life; painters, musicians and singers who practice their work regardless of how it is looked upon by official institutions.”<sup>36</sup> These actions, which are performed despite the friction they will cause with the regime, and despite potential persecution by the community, have to stem from aims of life that are manifest beyond the repressive societal order. To talk about spirit here, simply alludes to a certain vitality: not acting out of conformity, not being an automaton.

Conversely, the part of the self that strives to be engulfed by the ideological order – due to the security and predictability that it offers – is prone to the attraction and pull of post-totalitarianism. Havel describes this tension beautifully in his parable of the greengrocer who every morning puts up a sign bearing the slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” in his shop window. This act of putting up the sign, as a marker of support for the governing communist regime in Czechoslovakia, is, perhaps at first, an act of self-preservation. Not putting it up might lead to repercussions and sanctions. But, as time goes by, the act becomes automatised. It lacks any significant meaning and it lacks agency from the greengrocer; it is simply an act that everybody performs. The actual significance of the slogan also becomes lost. It does not signal any unity between workers. It does, however, communicate a common complacency and conformity. It is a shared act void of meaning, except for its uncanny message of subjugation. This blindness can be developed into a shared form of blindness: “The woman who ignored the greengrocer’s slogan may well have hung a similar slogan an hour ago in the corridor of the office where she works. [...] When the greengrocer visits her office, he will not notice her slogan either.”<sup>37</sup> When the reflection – the dialogue within the subject concerning the meaning of his act and the significance of the signs – stops, order prevails and servitude becomes automatic.<sup>38</sup> The consequence of not putting up the sign is not, at this later stage, only potential repression from the government but, more crucially, a falling-out with the way of life that is habitual for the rest of society.<sup>39</sup>

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36 Havel, V., “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 66.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 34–35.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Havel's greengrocer exemplifies the pull towards authoritarianism that in Weil's understanding stems from being submerged into the collective. This movement entails a diminishing of the freedom and room to pursue acts beyond collective expectations that promote the growth of intellectual and moral understanding. This introduces another question: how can we have communities without a collective? Or, to put it differently: is there a benevolent form of collectivity that lacks this notion of conformity and subjugation? Weil speaks of the "warmth" that is required in order for us not to fall into the vicious form of collectivity. At first glance, it does not seem to be a political concept. It does, however, stand in contrast to the feeling of being outside – of alienation. It appeals to our sense of belonging. Whereas the desire for conformity exemplified in the greengrocer's way of thoughtlessly putting up the propaganda sign in his window speaks of something else, of fear, of a sense of belonging that is illusory.

### **Moral agency versus rule following**

For Weil, belonging is not based on shared ideology or laws and regulations, but rather prevails through the subject's understanding of herself as a being that can be oppressed, hurt and violated: "If you say to someone who has ears to hear: 'What you are doing to me is not just', you may touch and awaken at its source the spirit of attention and love."<sup>40</sup> Through this acknowledgement of one's own and, by extension, the other's vulnerability, a communion is established. Belonging is in this sense based on a direct moral perception – by "someone who has ears to hear" – rather than through identifying with an ideological order or common values. When our sense of belonging is breached, we understand, if our self-understanding is acute enough, that something has been violated. A society can be more or less prone to acknowledging this vulnerability of the subject. Our sense of community is founded on our common (i.e. impersonal) acknowledgement of our propensity to be violated and our power to violate others. In this context, impersonality refers to the moral sensibility that is prone to detecting the vulnerability of the other. This recognition, which builds on moral perception, rather than ideology, identity and rule following, resides beyond the discourses of political power. However, without this foundation, which enables us to sense the vulnerability of the other, belongingness cannot gain a foothold in a community.

The connection with the part of oneself that is vulnerable leads to an understanding of the other's being vulnerable as well. Weil distinguishes between the juridical concept of rights and the moral concept of justice. The ex-

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40 Weil, S., *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, p. 83.

pectation of being treated justly runs deeper than appeals to personal rights, since severe injustice does not require any set of rules as a comparison for us to understand its unjustness: “If a young girl is being forced into a brothel she will not talk about her rights. In such a situation the word would sound ludicrously inadequate.”<sup>41</sup> That which is breached in this case is not merely the rights of the girl but rather her spirit. This violation cannot properly be described in juridical language, since the concept of rights externalises the act, as if that which would have been breached is a violation of the social order, whereas in fact the violation reaches the human spirit: “The profound and childlike and unchanging expectation of good in the heart.”<sup>42</sup> This does not mean that societies would be better off without notions of rights, law and order; rather, it means that these concepts do not give us the whole story. In case we do not have the means to understand a violation as something that wounds the human spirit, then rights, law and order will not necessarily help us to perceive more clearly. In Weil’s view, this vocabulary obscures: “Thanks to this word [rights], what should have been a cry of protest from the depths of the heart has been turned into a shrill nagging of claims and counter-claims.”<sup>43</sup> That is, if we conceive rule following as more important than our acute perception of violations of the other’s expectations of being treated justly, then we have lost our true sense of belongingness.

Havel makes a similar distinction when he writes about a dignified life for each and every citizen, which is required in a legitimate political system: “The key to a humane, dignified, rich and happy life does not lie either in the constitution or in the criminal code.”<sup>44</sup> Dignity is not a matter of establishing some set of rights and obligations that should not be breached; it is attained by a structure that permits the individual a certain freedom to establish his or her way of life that sustains the basic needs required. Of course, establishing certain common rights and obligations might be helpful for enabling this kind of freedom. On the other hand, the notion of rights does not guarantee a dignified life; something more is required. Heeding a certain rule of law can even result in the opposite. The successive development towards a blind way of rule following, portrayed in the parable of the greengrocer, will obstruct our direct and very human understanding of dignity.

Havel notes that opposition to totalitarianism can only be successful when it has “the existential backing of every member of the community.”<sup>45</sup> He envisions an existential revolution in which “a newfound inner relation-

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41 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

44 Havel, V. “The Power of the Powerless”, p. 77.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 93

ship to other people and to the human community” entails a renewed rootedness and a higher sense of responsibility.<sup>46</sup> Although these ideas might seem radical, and both Havel and Weil seem to have little of a proper political philosophy to offer, the appeal to dignity, freedom and justice, as concepts that reside in the moral subject, has some merit. They help us in acknowledging how, regardless of what the current political system of the government might be, there is a potential sense of dignity and justice in each and every citizen. Weil’s point is that even when this dignity is breached, it becomes apparent exactly because the breach is simultaneously a violation and an acknowledgement of the vulnerability of the subject.

A sense of rootedness, community and belonging is then achieved through acknowledging this moral propensity, which is not set by any given rules applied by jurisdiction and force.

## Conclusion

Democracy offers no defense against dictatorship. By the nature of things, the person is subdued to the collectivity, and rights are dependent upon force. The lies and misconceptions which obscure this truth are extremely dangerous because they prevent us from appealing to the only thing which is immune to force and can preserve us from it: namely, the other force which is the radiance of the spirit.<sup>47</sup>

If we return to the example of Viktor Orbán and Hungary’s conflict with the EU, I think there is something to be learned about the nature of authoritarianism through this reading of Weil and Havel. When Orbán sees his authoritarian goals threatened, he appeals to the democratic rights of Hungary as a member of the EU. At the same time he turns a blind eye to his own government’s suppression of the rights of minorities and those with dissenting views in Hungary. His blindness is not solely one of double standards: appealing to democracy and plurality in one case while simultaneously turning a blind eye to these values in another. His blindness runs deeper than that, and in this sense he is not unique. If there is nothing that evokes our sense of dignity and justice, beyond a set ideological order with its notions of rights, obligations and rules, then we will be stuck in the dynamics of power. The dynamics of power means that belongingness in a community always takes the form of submersion, i.e. the compromising of one’s subjective agency for the gain of conformity. Both Weil and Havel show how this involves an ail-

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46 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

47 Weil, S., *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, p. 81.

ing form of belongingness. For them, true belonging implies an acceptance of the open-endedness, vulnerability and contingency of human experience. By not fleeing into ideological orders and conformity, we gain a vital agency in our actions. This form of agency is required in order for us to orientate ourselves in the plurality of forms of life, to acknowledge them as engaged in variations of our common open-ended project.<sup>48</sup>

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