

“The Power of the Powerless” (1978): Discussion Questions & Havel on the Dangers of Worldview

“The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.”—Letter 96 to Olga (3 October 1981)

“I had an afternoon shift, it was wonderful summer weather, I was sitting on a pile of iron, resting thinking over my own affairs and at the same time, gazing at the crown of a single tree some distance beyond the fence. . . I found myself in a very strange and wonderful state of mindSuddenly, it seemed to me that all the beautiful summer days I had ever experienced and would yet experience were present in that moment.....I seemed to be experiencing, in my mind, a moment of supreme bliss, of infinite joy..... it was a moment of supreme self-awareness, a supremely elevating state of the soul, a total and totally harmonic merging of existence with itself and with the entire world.....It is, I would say, an experience of the limits of the finite; one has approached the outermost limits of the meaning that his finite, worldly existence can offer him..... and for this very reason, he is suddenly given a glimpse into the abyss of the infinite, of uncertainty, of mystery. There is simply nowhere else to go—except into emptiness, into the abyss itself.”—Letter 91 to Olga (29 August 1981)

Havel’s “The Power of the Powerless” was probably his most important political work during the middle of his life as a dissident, and it influenced numbers of others who sought to resist in some way the totalitarian powers in Eastern Europe. As a book of political and moral analysis, it assumes a number of philosophical and ethical positions. It assumes a particular human anthropology, as well as a particular cosmology, even as it leaves more open-ended its claims about the transcendent and about shared human understanding.

1. How does the original audience for this essay shape its content and concerns? (125-126)
2. What is the specter of dissent, and why was it important in 1978? (127)
3. What are several aspects of “post-totalitarian” society that Havel draws attention to? (127ff.)
4. What makes the example of the green grocer so significant to the essay’s message? (132-133)
5. What makes ideology a false approach to the reality of the world? (133-134)
6. What makes “life” different than totalitarianism? (134)
7. How does ideology reverse all language and require others to live alongside a lie? (135-136)
8. How does accepting ideology make the individual part of the system and enables it to assert its interpretation over everything in its own interests? (136-139)
9. How is the post-totalitarian system a warning as to where the West, too, could go? (140-145)
10. What would happen to the green grocer if he actively refused to cooperate? (146ff.)
11. What is the “hidden sphere” (or later the “second culture”), and why is it important? (148ff.)
12. What makes Solzhenitsyn’s example so important? (150)
13. How does living in the truth recover responsibility? (153-154)
[Skipping sections. X-XIII]
14. Why does a genuine commitment to “small-scale work” often end in confronting the system? (172-179)
[Skipping sections. XVI-XIX]
15. What is Heidegger’s basic point about the technological society, and why does Havel consider it important? (206-209)
16. What do Heidegger and Havel mean by “God”?
17. Why is Havel skeptical that politics alone can solve the problems, and why does he look to face-to-face local community as an answer? (209-212)
18. Why do the dissidents parallel this kind of community?

Havel of God and Worldview

What, in fact, is man responsible to? What does he relate to? What is the final horizon of his actions, the absolute vanishing point of everything he does, the undeceivable “memory of Being,” the conscience of the world and the final “court of appeal”? What is the decisive standard of measurement, the background of the field of each and his existential experiences? . . .

Ever since childhood, I have felt that I would not be myself-- a human being-- if I did not live in a permanent and manifold tension with this “horizon” of mine, the source of meaning and hope- ever since my youth, I’ve never been certain whether this is an “experience of God” or not. Whatever it is, I’m certainly not a proper Christian and Catholic (as so many of my good friends are) and there are many reasons for this. For instance, I do not worship this god of mine and I don’t see why I should By worshipping him in some model fashion, I don’t think I could improve either the world or myself, and it seems quite absurd to me that this “intimate-universal” partner of mine- who is sometimes my conscience, sometimes my hope, sometimes my freedom and sometimes the mystery of the world- might demand to be worshiped or might even judge me according to the degree to which I worshiped him. Related to this is my constant compulsion to reconsider things- originally, authentically, from the beginning- that is, in an unmediated dialogue with this god of mine I I refuse to simplify matters by referring to some respected, more material authority, even if I were the Holy Writ itself. (I accept the Gospel of Jesus as a challenge to go my own way.) When it gets right down to it, I am a child of the age of conceptual, rather than mystical, thought and therefore my god as well- if I am compelled to speak of him (which I do very unwillingly)—must appear as something terribly abstract, vague and unattractive (all the more so since my relationship to him is so difficult to pin down). . . .

God is provided with all the appropriate attributes (which oddly enough can alienate more often than drawing on closer). And something else that is typical of my god; he is a master of waiting, and in doing so he frequently unnerves me. It is as though he set up various possibilities around me and then waiting silently to see what I would do. If I fail, he punishes me, and of course he uses me as the agent of that punishment (pangs of conscience, for example); if I don’t fail, he rewards me (through my own relief and joy)-- and frequently, he leaves me in uncertainty. (By the way, when my conscience bothers me, why does it bother me? And when I rejoice, why do I rejoice? Is it not again because of him?) His Last Judgment is taking place now, continuously, always- and yet it is always the last: nothing that has happened can ever un-happen, everything remains in the “memory of Being” -- and I too remain there- condemned to be with myself till the end of time- just as I am and just as I make myself.
--Letter 41 to Olga (8 August 1980)

To begin with: I have never created, or accepted, any comprehensive “worldview.” Let alone any complete, unified, integrated and self-contained philosophical, ideological or other system of beliefs which, with no further adjustments, I could then identify with and which would provide answers to all my questions. This was certainly not out of apathy,nor on the contrary, out of any overanxious desire to take my stand, come what may, outside all currents of thought. It was simply because something very deep inside me has always resisted such an approach; I simply don’t seem to have the internal capacity for it.

The origin of this “inability” is obviously something in my constitution, in how I am internally structured, as it were. I have already written you about what faith means to me: it is simply a particular state of mind, that is, a state of persistent and productive openness, of persistent questioning, a need to “experience the world.” again and again, in as direct and unmediated a way as possible, and it does not, therefore, flow into me from some concretely defined outside object. For me, perseverance and continuity do not come from fixating on unchanging “convictions” but rather from a ceaseless process of

searching, demystification and penetration beneath the surface of phenomena in ways that do not depend on allegiance to given, ready-made methodology. My entire “experience of the world” has persuaded me of the mysterious multiformity and infinite “elusiveness” of the order of Being, which--by its very nature and by the very nature of the human mind--simply cannot be grasped and described by a consistent system of knowledge. By this I don’t mean to denigrate the significance of philosophical concepts; many I find fascinating for their penetrating insights and even their capacity to speak personally to me. Still, I can’t bring myself to accept them if it means closing the door to other concepts, or reinterpreting other concepts to conform to what I had already accepted. . . .

But to be more specific: it seems to me foolish, impossible and utterly pointless, for instance, to try to reconcile Darwin with Christ, or Marx with Heidegger, or Plato with Buddha. Each of them represents a certain level of Being and human experience and each bears witness to the world in his own particular way; each of them, to some extent and in some way, speaks to me, explains many things to me, and even helps me to live, and I simply don’t see why, for the sake of one, I should be denied an authentic experience of whatever another can show me, even more so because we are not talking here about different opinions on the same thing, but different ways of talking about very different things. I am simply advocating a kind of “parallelism” or “pluralism” in knowledge. . . .

The more slavishly and dogmatically a persona falls for a ready-made ideological system or “worldview,” the more certainly he will bury all chances of thinking, of freedom, of being clear about what he knows, the more certainly he will deaden the adventure of the mind and the more certainly—in practice— he will begin to serve the “order of death.” In any case, the moment when any system of thought culminates and declares itself complete, when it is brought to perfection and universality, has more than once been described as that deceptive moment, when the system ceases to live, collapses in upon itself (like the material collapse of a white dwarf star) and reality eludes its grasp once and for all.
--Letter 78 to Olga (1 May 1981)

[T]here is something more essential here than just the assumption of a “memory of being” (what is done cannot be undone), a kind of total registration of everything that it is not, therefore, just a passive, “optical” backdrop but chiefly a moral one, including standards of judgment and expectation, an assumption of “absolute justice”, that conferring of absolute meaning.

Clearly this is a supremely spiritual experience, or rather an experience of something supremely spiritual. Nevertheless, I confess I still can’t talk of God in this connection: God, after all, is one who rejoices, rages, loves, desires to be worshiped: in short, he behaves too much like a person for me. Yet I’m aware of a paradox here: if God does not occupy the place I am trying to define here, it will all appear to be no more than some abstract shilly-shallying. But what am I to do?

Whatever the case may be, the most profound and solid “experience of meaningfulness” – as a state of joyous, confirmed and reflected faith in the meaning of the universe and of one’s own life- has its source precisely here: in the vital experience of being in touch with the absolute horizon of Being. I think that this experience, and this experience alone, is the “suboceanic mountain range” that gives coherence and integrity to all those isolated “islands of meaning” adrift on the ocean of Nothingness, the only effective defense against that Nothingness. Though it reveals nothing of the secret of Being, nor responds in any way to the question of meaning, it is still the most essential way of coexisting with it.
--Letter 95 to Olga (26 September 1981)

Discussion Question: Would you characterize Havel’s views as post-modern? Why and/or why not?