

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts

By John Keane. New York: Basic Books, 2000, 532 pp., cloth, \$27.50

Reviewed by James F. Pontuso

Imagine that you woke up one morning and found that almost everyone around you was lying. Government leaders, the police, judges, and journalists lied all the time. Many ordinary people seemed to believe the lies, and those who did not kept to themselves. The lies were so obvious that you had only to use the evidence of your senses to know that what people were saying was untrue. It was claimed that apartment buildings were grand when they were uniform, gray, and ugly. It was said that material conditions in the country were improving when in reality most people were worse off than their parents had been. The government maintained that it was made up of laborers and dedicated to the welfare of workers, yet few government officials had ever held manual jobs, and most ordinary people toiled at low-paying, tedious work. The environment was contaminated, the educational system attempted to indoctrinate almost as much as it tried to teach, churches had been subverted, and people's morale was low. If you looked at the media, however, you would not have thought that these problems existed.

Living With Lies

When you described the reality that you saw around you instead of reciting official linguistic formulas, you discovered that although the government declared that people could freely express their views, it vigorously suppressed those who did. Your penchant for telling the truth brought you no end of misery. You were ridiculed, threatened, followed, and labeled an enemy of your

country. You were not allowed to pursue a career. You could find employment only in the most menial jobs. For signing a document that asked the government to obey its treaty obligations by granting its citizens natural rights, you were sent to jail, your spirit almost broken. You stuck to telling the truth, even in prison, despite there being no hope that your actions would effect a positive political change. The only reward for your integrity was the principle of integrity itself.

Then one day, a short while after one of your stays in prison, everyone stopped lying. You and some of your friends stood before a huge crowd meeting in a beautiful and historic square and swept away the government of lies by jingling your car keys (signaling the death knell of the regime). Everyone now realized that *you* had been telling the truth all along. They decided to make you leader of the country. You took the oath of office in a borrowed suit.

This little vignette might have been written by a surrealist playwright. It was written *about* a surrealist author, and every word is true. John Keane's biography *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* attempts to scrutinize Havel's life "without apologies, without illusions" (p. 12). Keane knew Havel during the embattled Czech's dissident years and even helped him smuggle some writings to the West. He seems to respect Havel's courage and is sympathetic to many of his principles. However, perhaps because Keane has no heroes (p. 11), his endeavor to be even-handed, realistic, and dispassionate fails adequately to

depict the strangeness and majesty of Havel's life.

The Fallen Hero

In one section about courage, Keane details an exchange between Havel and Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík (pp. 258-66). Havel and Vaculík had signed Charter 77, a document demanding that the Czechoslovak government abide by its obligations as a signatory to the Helsinki Treaty on Human Rights. In 1978, Vaculík criticized fellow Chartists for risking imprisonment by undertaking actions that had no prospect of changing government policy. Confrontation with a powerful and ruthless government dragged friends, family, and coworkers into a dangerous situation, he argued. He saw the intransigence of the Chartists as little more than self-righteous moralizing, an effort to demonstrate their superiority over average citizens who lived decent lives but did not challenge the status quo. Havel responded by arguing that Vaculík's position was a retreat from the principles of the Charter. Havel admitted that facing down a totalitarian state was risky business, but he believed that not opposing the government legitimized the Party's rule and justified the continuation of Communist dictatorship.

Keane uses this incident as one of the *tableaux vivants* that, he claims, help illuminate Havel's life. Havel's sentiments were "almost classical," Keane contends; Havel behaved like an ancient Greek or Roman in his insistence that courage was a precondition of citizenship (p. 265). Yet this *tableau vivant* almost makes us believe that Havel's courage consisted only of writing harsh letters to his associates. In fact, Havel spent most of his life in open opposition to one of the most repressive regimes in history. When Havel was not in prison for his defiance, he was hounded by the authorities. He underwent long and difficult interrogations by the secret police. He was followed constantly. His life was threatened regularly in "anonymous" telephone calls.

His apartment was broken into, his papers stolen, and his mentor, Jan Patočka, interrogated so relentlessly that he suffered a fatal stroke. Although Edá Kriseová's *Václav Havel: The Authorized Biography* has been criticized for its lack of impartiality, hers is a more accurate portrait of Havel's true courage in the face of evil.

Keane's analysis fails to convey the drama of Havel's resistance. Other people of conscience, such as Nelson Mandela and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, would have been kept in prison no matter what stance they took toward the authorities. Mandela could do nothing about being black, and his release frightened South Africa's apartheid government. Solzhenitsyn had even less influence over Stalin's cruel megalomania. Havel could have left prison any time he wanted: he had merely to renounce his "anti-socialist activities." The Communist leadership would have loved for the internationally famous playwright to recant his opposition. Think, then, of the enormous act of will Havel must have exerted to remain in jail knowing that he was the agent of his own imprisonment. Just a few words repudiating Charter 77 would have secured his freedom. No matter whether he was ill, depressed, or frightened, Havel had to struggle not to submit. Courage was a never-ending battle against himself. Can a dry comparison to classical literature really do justice to such fortitude?

Keane maintains that his intent in this book is to follow Havel's principle of "living in truth." To disclose that truth Keane endeavors "to uncover the naked bodies in the bedroom ... and to peek through the keyhole into the top-secret meetings" (p. 12). Sadly, Keane instead peeks through the keyhole into the bedroom, devoting one section of his book to Havel's extramarital affairs. Perhaps the exposure of Havel's private life is necessary to present the problem that such behavior poses "for his philosophy of living responsibly, in the truth" (p. 306), but one must consider just how Havel's flings

have affected his public life. Havel is of interest not because he may have had affairs, but because of his achievements as a dissident, writer, and political leader. In terms of his public life, it is not clear what the reader learns from Keane's exposé. Even if we believe that Keane's motive in revealing such details is to inform and not to titillate, the same cannot be said for his treatment of Havel's wife, Olga. What possible justification can there be for disclosing personal details about a woman whose dignified and selfless devotion to others through her work in the Olga Havelova Medical Foundation was appreciated by so many? If Keane had understood Havel better, he might have reflected on the element of responsibility that comes with "living in truth."

Keane maintains that Havel is a tragic failure primarily because he has become unpopular with the Czech people (pp. 407-510). There are many reasons for this disaffection, some trivial, some serious. Much public criticism is aimed at Havel's second wife, Dagmar. Olga was popular and Dagmar, who married Havel less than a year after Olga's death, was seen as something of an interloper. Olga created a medical foundation, Dagmar was an actress who once starred in a risqué movie. Over many years, Olga learned how to be the gracious wife of a great man. Dagmar, more used to celebrity than fame, misunderstood her place in the public life of a nation's leader.

Keane makes the more serious charge that Havel has been unable to guide the nation successfully through the difficult post-Communist transition. To present a true picture of Havel, however, Keane might have dug a little deeper into Czech politics. The Czech people's eventual impatience with their political leadership was inevitable. Recovering from forty years of disastrous Communist rule has been more difficult than anyone could have imagined. As Slavenka Drakulic argues in *Café Europa: Life After Communism*, Communism has crippled the think-

ing of many Eastern Europeans, hindering them from becoming self-activated citizens or entrepreneurs.

Why should Havel be held responsible for the Czech Republic's lack of economic progress? As Havel explains, "the authority of the [Czech] president" is "more statesmanlike than political," for he wields little real power. Traditionally, the Czech president, elected by the legislature, is above party affiliation and acts more as a referee between competing party blocs. He is a symbol of the nation rather than a true executive, for the Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy where the prime minister wields the actual decision-making authority. To paraphrase Alexander Hamilton, one of the architects of the strong American presidency, for the executive to be powerful it must have adequate constitutional provision and sufficient electoral means. Since the Czech president has neither, Havel can hardly be blamed for the failed policies of the actual political leadership.

Much of the Czech people's cynicism toward politics was created by Václav Klaus, the ebullient former prime minister who promised in 1992 that the transition to a prosperous free-market economy would be completed in five years. The Czech gross domestic product actually contracted in 1997 and remained flat for three years thereafter.

The reasons for the failure of Klaus' policies are complex. Writing in the *Prague Post* of Jan. 6, 1999, Ondrej Benda discusses some of the reasons. Coupon privatization, the scheme of selling off state-run enterprises to the Czech population for nominal fees, disbursed responsibility for the management of industries too broadly. Plant managers had no real incentive to modernize industries, fearing the loss of their own or their workers' jobs. Investment firms bought the privatization coupons, but the fund managers were more interested in quick returns than in restructuring companies. With little supervision from stockholders or the

government, fund managers were free to “tunnel” companies, selling off lucrative assets and pocketing the profits.

After the initial euphoria associated with the Czech “miracle,” as the early years of the Klaus government were called, investors lost faith in the reliability of Czech companies and capital dried up. Moreover, Klaus failed to privatize the banks. Inefficient companies came looking for loans, and the government, fearing the political costs of high unemployment, allowed banks to prop up industries that could not produce goods competitive in the world market. When, burdened with mounting debt, the banks nearly collapsed, the flaws of Klaus’ policies were revealed. The Czech Republic faced the same painful reality of plant closings and unemployment that Poland and Hungary had experienced earlier in the decade. Long accustomed to their Communist bosses’ false promises of a better future, Czechs understandably cast a skeptical eye at all their leaders.

While Havel has taken an interest in the economic predicament of his country, especially the scandals surrounding the transfer of publicly owned companies to private hands, his primary concern has been to encourage the development of a civil society. Havel consistently argues in favor of voluntary acceptance of the rule of law, fair and open business transactions, and community-based participation in politics. What we in the West take for granted, Havel maintains, must be slowly recreated at the local level in post-Communist countries.

Havel’s legacy will surely outlive his time as Czech president. Just a cursory glance at his speeches shows that he is one of the most astute analysts of the political dilemmas of our age. We are faced, he maintains, with a global economy and mass communication on an unprecedented scale. In order to compete, businesses must become ever-larger multinational corporations. Political integration, especially in Europe, has created

larger and larger political units. American popular culture has come to dominate the thinking of many people throughout the world. For all the promise of a more prosperous and peaceful world, something has been lost. Vague discontent characterizes the times, despite the enormous prosperity of the 1990s. Many people feel as if their lives are beyond their control. Decisions about their future are made in far off places by unknown leaders.

Havel’s prescription for modern ills is to return political authority to local communities where both the problems and possible solutions are comprehensible to the average citizen. Not since Thomas Jefferson has there been a political leader more insistent on the salutary effects of small government. It may be true, as Keane charges, that Havel has misjudged the complexity of some of the day-to-day business of government. But Havel has identified the most pressing difficulty of our time: whether, in the face of the massive changes brought about by the spread of a global technological society it is still possible for human beings to control their own destinies.

Keane repeats Stanislav Milota’s rebuke of Havel that once in office he came to appreciate the perks of office too much and refused to listen to opinions opposed to his own, especially those of his former dissident friends. Milota chides Havel for riding in “chauffeur-driven limos,” instead of catching “a tram up to the Castle [the seat of government]” (p. 411). Perhaps Havel has stopped listening to his former dissident allies because their very steadfastness makes them poor politicians under democratic rule where compromise and moderation are required. “The evolution of democracy,” Havel mused (in a Dec. 21, 1992 address at Wroclaw University), “often pushes [dissidents] out of politics altogether to make way for people who ... are more realistic and thus more adaptable in everyday practical politics.” Keane’s accusation that Havel has somehow abused his power and is

guilty of *hubris* is surely overstated. What abuses of power? Havel has never suspended the rule of law, ruled arbitrarily, nor gained financially from his public service.

Keane is correct that Havel has become unpopular with his countrymen. Every one of my numerous Czech friends gripes about him. Then, after they are finished with their complaints, I ask them two questions: Who should take Havel’s place as president? Will the next president be better than Havel? This is far from a scientific poll, but the results are thus far unanimous: I do not know and probably not, they all say.

Philosophic Reflections

Keane states that he aims to present “philosophical reflections” on the “subject of power” (p. 9). Yet he investigates power through the lens of political philosophers and concepts, such as Machiavelli’s power-seeking *Prince* and Friedrich von Hardenberg’s theory of a “crowned republic,” both alien to Havel’s own speculation (pp. 12, 377).

For Havel, the problem of power relates to the possibility of comprehending its moral use which in turn leads to a consideration of the grounds of morality. According to Havel, we face a “global crisis” caused by the “hypertrophic impersonal” exercise of “power.” Havel explains that “this condition is characterized by a loss of metaphysical certainties, of the experience of the transcendental, of any superpersonal moral authority, and any kind of higher horizon.” Without belief in a transcendent realm, humans are caught in a never-ending flux of events and historical occurrences, all leading nowhere and signifying nothing. Ordering principles such as truth, justice, and morality cannot exist since all things are in a chaotic and unpredictable state of change. The name given to this state of absolute uncertainty is nihilism, and the philosopher who Havel seems to believe most fully faced nihilism is Martin Heidegger.

(See Havel's *Disturbing the Peace*, pp. 158-159.)

For Heidegger, nihilism is the necessary consequence of a misconception about existence. The principles of the West were premised on the belief that humans could understand their lives by comprehending the things around them; they could know existence by cataloguing and describing phenomena. In their attempt to know the world, they even tried to make organizing principles, such as justice, truth and morality, into phenomena, understood in much the same way as tables or chairs. According to Heidegger, Plato was originally and primarily responsible for the effort to put all of existence under the command of human knowledge. Plato turned Socrates' "What is" questions (What is justice?, etc.) into the theory of the forms. Although not of the same order as everyday things and events in the visible world, the forms were considered to be phenomena that could be described and catalogued. Aristotle named the study and indexing of such non-visible phenomena "metaphysics."

Philosophers after Plato disagreed with many of his concepts, according to Heidegger, but they all accepted the principle of metaphysical certainty. They all reasoned that the phenomena made sense as the result of some overarching metaphysical truths that explained and ordered the experiences of daily life. The consummation of the hope to understand existence through the application of human reason is science. Science's offspring is technology, the instrument by which the discoveries of science are used to benefit the human species.

Technology has been successful in bringing the physical world under human control. It has created wealth, a long life span, and a comfortable existence, one almost liberated from an overriding concern to provide for bodily needs. Yet this freedom has brought a new awareness and a novel anxiety. Now that the whole of existence is under our command, what

should we do with it? The fruits of technology provide for our physical needs, but they cannot answer the more difficult questions such as: Why am I alive? Where did I come from? What am I to do with my life? Why must I die?

Oddly, Heidegger argues, it was the anxiety over the inability of science and technology to answer fundamental queries about existence that pushed the human race headlong into greater efforts to control the world through science. This exertion succeeded only in making the entire phenomenal world into an object of use. All the things became "standing reserve." Science and technology provided the human race with a new power, and in the twentieth century that power was forcefully exercised over humans who were also seen as things to be used. Even the seemingly chaotic events of human history were systematized and made comprehensible in the "science" of history established by Hegel and Marx. Marxism especially became a mechanism for the violent modeling of human beings into a "scientific" form of human association.

Neither the philosophies of history nor the technological conquest of nature fully answers our questions about life and death. Heidegger argues that there are two responses to the anxiety of meaning and the awareness of death. The first is the "inauthentic" disposition to throw oneself more deeply into the everyday concerns, not to question the prevailing order of things, and never face the question of death. The "authentic" response to the human predicament is to stalwartly confront death, an act that leads to the realization that neither the things of this world nor the metaphysical speculations of philosophers adequately establish meaning for human existence. Heidegger calls this revelation a confrontation with Being. Being is the precondition of existence. (See Heidegger's *Being and Time*, SCM Press, 1962, p. 318.) It is what makes all things exist, but it is not one of the things.

Heidegger did a thought experiment to demonstrate Being. When there are no things to distract us, we are bored. We say that there is nothing (no-thing) to do. When we put aside all of the mundane and practical matters that fill up our time, we get a glimpse of the mystery that is Being. Being is no thing. (See Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 142-149.) From no-thing human beings are "thrown," into life. We have no control over the past and little power over the situation of our personal existence. We have no idea why Being is, and therefore have no true sense of how best to live our lives. Still, live we must, and Heidegger insists that an authentic life is better than an inauthentic one. An authentic life is one that faces the abyss of Being without flinching, one that makes choices without following the inauthentic many who distract themselves with mundane tasks. It is a life that refuses to submit to metaphysical systems that pretend to explain everything, and that resists the temptation presented by science and technology to believe that we can live forever.

What is Heidegger's cure for the challenge of nihilism? When asked, he responded that "only a God can save us now," meaning that we need a new revelation of Being, one that does not attempt to ground reality in metaphysical certainty. Exactly what kind of revelation Heidegger had in mind, when and where it will take place, he does not say. All we can do is wait and live authentically. Havel takes a great deal from Heidegger's analysis. The characters in Havel's plays are "thrown" into absurd situations beyond their control. Havel agrees with Heidegger that we must live authentic lives, make choices for ourselves, and not accept things as they are. Living responsibly entails taking charge of our fate and refusing to accept that "they," some distant unknown others, control our destiny. Havel's existential attitude caused him to dissent from the monolithic regime of Communist

Czechoslovakia. Havel believes that Marxist ideology is an effort to structure reality by forcing the complex and multifarious phenomena of life into a simple, comprehensible scientific structure. He calls Communism the "order of death" because it kills all novelty and spontaneity.

Havel does not follow Heidegger further. In fact, Havel's philosophic meditations are an effort to refute Heidegger's presentation of Being, for if Being is no-thing, then there cannot be moral principles guiding life. Without moral principles by which to judge them, one political system is as good as another. There are no legitimate grounds on which to oppose the evil of Communism. Indeed, absent moral principles, the very concept of evil is meaningless. But Havel personally experienced the evil of Communism, so he set out to find some way to discover a foundation for morality.

Havel's first and most obvious response to Heidegger's philosophy is the principle of *living in truth*. For Havel, it is not necessary to know Being before understanding the beings, or making judgments about the things that we experience. If food in restaurants is dull, uniform, and monotonous, as was the case when the Communist bureaucracy standardized menus throughout Czechoslovakia, we sensually experience the lack of variety and choice. When we look at gray, uniform, high-rise apartments, we see their brutal ugliness. When we listen to repetitive ideological speeches proclaiming the excellence of the county's restaurants or the beauty of its buildings, we know these statements to be lies. *Living in truth* has a phenomenological reality.

Havel also attempts to establish an experiential basis for morals. His plays "are variations on the theme ... of the crisis of human identity," for they challenge Heidegger's presentation of Being as no-thing. (See Havel's *Letters to Olga*, Knopf, 1990, pp. 158-9.) If Being were no-thing then there could not be a higher or transcendent set of codes that guide our ac-

tions. But Havel makes us wonder how is it that moral codes arose in the first place. Why are people not self-interested always and everywhere? The characters in Havel's play *The Beggars' Opera* are driven exclusively by calculations of self-interest. They think nothing of morals because morals do not exist. In *The Beggars' Opera*, Keane explains, "selfishness is 'reality,' and ... the system encourages and depends upon chronic lying, double-crossing, backstabbing, trickery, the greedy pursuit of self-interest as it is defined at that particular moment. To act in contrary ways, for instance to embrace precepts like honesty or care for others, would amount to pure foolishness" (pp. 235-6).

Havel's play is a thought experiment intended to show the unreality of an amoral world. No human society has ever existed or could ever exist under the conditions Havel creates in *The Beggars' Opera*. The simplest communication between people would be impossible because language is a kind of agreement that words have meaning. Since we have no example of an amoral society, can we therefore assume that moral, or responsible, actions between people are somehow natural? Can we not say that Being is constructed in such a way as to give humans an awareness of morality? Havel's absurd plays are not "an expression of a loss of faith.... Quite the opposite, only someone whose being thirsts after meaning ... can experience the absence of meaning as something painful ... the experience of absurdity is inseparable from the experience of meaning; it is merely, in a manner of speaking, its obverse." (See *Letters to Olga*, p. 177.)

It could be argued, of course, that morality is a human construct passed down from one generation to the next. Morals are no more than conventions—invented to meet the needs of social interaction—whose origins have been lost in the mists of time. But this argument merely pushes Havel's question back further. Why did all societies establish moral

rules? Why was narrow self-interest, dishonesty, theft, and, cruelty, especially to the innocent, proscribed in every culture known to us? Perhaps, because Being dictated these restrictions and humans discovered, rather than invented, morality.

Havel does not argue that people *must* follow moral codes. He is quite aware that people often behave badly. He would oppose any effort to make people follow hard and fast rules, which, after all, is what the Communists tried to do. Life is too complex and variable for a simple and universal code to apply always and everywhere. Rather, Havel attempts to lay the groundwork for the *possibility* of responsible behavior. He does this by first showing the impossibility of living a life without morals and then by providing phenomenological examples of moral dictates.

In 1982, three years into his imprisonment, Havel wrote to his wife about seeing a woman on television reporting the weather. Suddenly the sound went out, and realizing that she could not communicate with the audience, the woman became embarrassed. Havel saw in her "unresolvable situation" the "primordial nakedness of human helplessness." Reflecting on his reaction to the experience, Havel wondered why he "suddenly—and quite irrationally" felt "an overwhelming sense of responsibility for someone whom I not only did not know, but whose misery was merely transmitted to me via television?" (See *Letters to Olga*, pp. 321-24.)

The answer he provides seems to be as follows. Human beings have a capacity to convey ideas, emotions, and experiences. The most fundamental of those experiences is our "thrownness" into existence. We are all aware of one another's vulnerability and anxiety. The recognition of our own weakness in the situation of another is the experiential root of compassion. It is the source of our caring about anything outside ourselves. It is the reason why harming the innocent is so abhorred, for they

are the most weak and vulnerable, the closest to the true human condition. Where for Heidegger our "thrownness" leads away from community and towards solipsism, Havel shows, by his caring for a stranger, that the awareness of our "thrownness" may lead to empathy, compassion, and responsibility towards others.

Havel does one other thought experiment in an effort to establish a phenomenology of responsibility. Here, he puts himself on all-but-empty night tram in Prague. With no one to see him, he could easily avoid paying the one crown fare. Why, then, does he pay for the one-stop ride? Or, if he fails to pay, why does it bother him?

We have, Havel maintains, a kind of "partner," another "I," not the same "I" that pays or fails to pay the crown. The "partner-I" surveys our behavior and judges it. This "voice" could be called conscience, but it is deeper than the traditional idea of conscience, since it seems to apply to those who have no conscience. Havel explains that "a certain residue of moral awareness clings to every human tendency." Even a "thoroughly evil person" needs "to make excuses for his evil in some way or to lie to himself about it." The fact that we almost always *justify* our actions to ourselves signifies that the *just* is an inevitable concern to human beings.

Where does this other "I" come from? It is a product of our being thrown into a world that we did not create, but in which we must live. It is our alienation from ourselves which arises when we realize that our personal concerns are not the only things that matter in the universe. This distance from ourselves makes it possible to see and judge our behavior as if it were being done by another. It makes it possible for us to ask, What would I think if someone else behaved this way? The inner workings of the human soul indicate to Havel that Being is constructed in such a way as to make morality possible. He argues that "our 'I'—to the extent that it has not been entirely successful in suppressing its

orientation toward Being, and completely absorbed in its existence-in-the world—has a sense of responsibility pure and simple ... it hears within ... itself the 'voice' in which Being addresses and calls out to it ... and it takes this voice more seriously than anything." (See *Letters to Olga*, pp. 220, 266, 344-7.)

Plato and Patočka

Edward F. Findlay's informative article ("Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique," *The Review of Politics* 61: 403-38) lays out Havel's intellectual debt to his mentor, Jan Patočka. Findlay contends that Havel is a devotee of Patočka's notion of "Negative Platonism." For Patočka, Negative Platonism is a way of investigating philosophic issues. Rather than attempting to resolve questions on the basis of some preconceived metaphysical categories, Negative Platonism is an open-ended quest to understand the problems of human existence. Patočka's ideal is Socrates, who did not attempt to close off inquiry but instead pursued his "What is" questions as far as the human mind could take them. Despite, or perhaps because of, his relentless quest to discover the human virtues, Socrates was responsible; his questions emanated from a care for the soul. He wanted to know how to live well. In discovering it for himself, he could share what he found with everyone.

Plato and Aristotle, according to Patočka, attempted to answer Socrates' questions, and in doing so they established metaphysical doctrines. Their students and generations thereafter were influenced by that metaphysics in such a way as to answer questions before they were asked. While metaphysics might have been intended to be a suit of armor against the abyss, it became a straightjacket inhibiting human thought and freedom.

Havel partly agrees with Patočka's analysis. He does not believe that truth can be frozen into metaphysical principle; life is too complicated for that. Yet, Havel writes of a unitary

"order of Being," which implies a fixed metaphysical principle. Findlay argues that Havel's analysis either "lacks clarity" or is written in a literary form less precise than Patočka's philosophy. But, if Havel actually took Patočka's principles as his own, why was he still attempting—long after Patočka's death—to work out the problems of Heidegger in his prison meditations to Olga? Perhaps Havel disagreed with his mentor.

Havel seems to hold that an openness to questions is an insufficient support for morality. He argues instead that morals are grounded phenomenologically, in experience. Wherever there are human beings, there are moral considerations. Being is constructed so that in every time and culture human beings have raised moral concerns.

Havel's relationship to Patočka is similar to Plato's to Socrates. We can most clearly see the manner in which Plato attempted to correct Socrates in *Lysis*, a dialogue about friendship. Despite a spirited attempt, Socrates and his young interlocutor cannot seem to discover what friendship is. The dialogue ends with both admitting to being more confused than when they started. Socrates' questions served only to befuddle those engaged in the dialogue. Despite the confusion, however, friendship is evident in *Lysis*. Plato's literary form shows the reader the phenomenon of friendship through the gentle, caring, and thoughtful manner in which the two characters interact.

The virtues are visible in human affairs because Being is constructed in such a manner as to make them visible. Being does not dictate that we follow moral guidelines. That would make morals into no more than instincts and thereby eliminate our freedom and dignity. But Being shows us in our every day experience that morals do exist: morality is a human possibility. Being presents itself to humans as something good and eternal. "It cannot be an accident," Havel writes in an effort to correct Patočka, "or a mere concord

of countless misperceptions if, after thousands of years, people of different epochs and cultures feel that they are somehow parts and part-takers of the same integral Being, carrying within themselves a piece of the infinity of that Being." Although the traditions and practices of people and cultures attempt to capture the significance of Being in different ways, all have a similar sense of wholeness that expresses a moral "home" for our existence. (See Peter Augustine Lawler, "Havel's Postmodern View of Man in the Cosmos," *Perspectives on Political Science* 26: 33.)

Havel in Perspective

The oddest part of Keane's book is its title, *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy?* In 1989, a few days after the student protests in Prague, Havel was summoned to a meeting with top Party officials. The night before the meeting secret police thugs had called on the telephone threatening his life. Havel and his friends walked up the hill to the Castle to be greeted by a somber group of Communists, some of them wearing guns. It is not an exaggeration to report that the thugs all left and Havel stayed. How can a man who has enjoyed such a victory over an evil opponent be said to have led a tragic life? But there is more. In everything he has written or done, Havel has pointed out that moral behavior is not only possible, but is the surest means to a responsible and dignified life. He has reminded us that to behave responsibly is part of the "Order of Being," and therefore connects us to something eternal. He explained that although we are fated to die, our end need not be tragic if our actions aspire to what is good and eternal. No man could have done more to overcome the tragedy of existence.

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