

**CONVERSATION WITH VACLAV HAVEL**  
**in THE PRAGUE CIRCLE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

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Havel: First of all I should like to say that I will refrain from insulting the ears of this highly educated assembly, and I shall reply to you in my own tongue. Secondly, I should like to say that I have been moved and gratified to see that I have become the subject of this discussion. Thirdly, let me say that the two papers we have just heard have revealed to me a new knowledge of what I am doing and a new insight into my way of thinking. And I am fascinated by the fact that the previous speaker even remembers my support for an amendment in the statutes of the writers' association, one of the most dumb proposals I have ever made.

Finally, I see my presence here as an opportunity to know from the smart people here about myself and what is problematic or controversial in my thought. I should like to be rather a grateful listener than the principal speaker, but on the other hand I am certainly prepared to make comments and answer any questions that you wish to pose.

Q. Last February you spoke in Switzerland about the end of an age, and certainly you indicated that you thought we had entered a post-modern era. I wonder if you would explain a little of what you meant by that?

A. Post-modernism is a word that has rather frequently been used these days. And different people see the content of this word in different ways, which again is a post-modern phase in itself. As for myself, I thought about a certain context or a certain atmosphere or situation, rather than some rigid category that would be binding once and for all. And it is in the same way that I have used the word post-modern in my [city name] speech. In that speech I used the word post-modern principally for two reasons: first, I had wanted to provoke all the modern politicians I know while speaking about post-modern politics. And secondly, I really believe that the present time puts before us a challenge to pursue a different kind of politics compared with the one that we are used to so far. And I have tried in that speech to indicate a direction which, in my view, politics should follow at this time. If I had to bring the idea down to a simple explanation I have cited, I would answer that I think that some human dimension should be returned to politics. Thirdly, I should say it correctly, I am not maintaining that there is no human dimension in politics whatever. But, on the other hand, the major experience that I have had in my life in the realm of high politics is the fact that the personal qualities of the political leaders, the sympathies or animosities between them, play a terribly important role indeed. So, I have certainly not in mind, sir, that more room should be given to suppress psychological traits of individual politicians. I believe that the room that they have at present is large enough. I recommend that the human dimension should be returned to politics as such. Of course I could give a rather lengthy explanation as to what I have meant, but I believe that in this way I would spend too much time answering one question only.

Q. I have a question about the foundations of your ideas. I believe that what you think about appropriate political action must depend upon ideas about appropriate human action in general. Prof. Elshtain summarized your view as a loss of metaphysical certainty, coupled with loss of recognition of such good things as responsibility and a purely moral act. Would you accept to say, rather, that instead of a loss of metaphysical certainty, your view seems to be instead the recovery of a small but appropriate bit of metaphysical certainty?

A. Let me say that I think that experts—everything around us, including ourselves, is finite. It seems to me that any strong orientation or movement in this finite world is singular only against the background of the infinite. This is the only thing that can provide a criterion, and without that I believe that our life would only resemble Brown's movement of molecules [Brownian motion]. All my life I have given much thought to and attempted to analyze the reasons that lead people to behave in a decent manner, and why, if they behave in an indecent manner, they try to pretend to themselves and to those around them that their behavior is decent after all. And I have always thought that the only way one can explain this is the fact that there is in humans a moral imperative, moral conscience, articulated in different ways or at least an awareness of a moral imperative which comes from outside and we should look beyond the human world and this is what I have first seen as metaphysical spectre and metaphysical certainty, with the result that I would not be able to explain the reasons for moral grounds or for criteria or for all the problems people have about morality. I have often stated much interest in the phenomenon of guilty conscience. Let's suppose that we commit something wrong, but nobody knows that. Nevertheless we still feel a guilty conscience, and that is evident of the type that feels related also to something else than another human being.

Q. I have always been struck by, the first time I read you was in essay and then I started reading the plays, and I had the feeling I was encountering completely different persons. I could not reconcile this tension; I wondered whether the author was schizophrenic or whether something else was holding that tension together. Could you please speak, first, about your own interpretation of these two major voices; secondly, if someone commissioned you to write a play about one of these extraordinary mass killers that have characterized the political landscape of the twentieth century, which voice would you use, that of the playwright . . . or would you write about these mass killers as a visionary, as a political essayist? Would you encode it or would decode it?

A. First of all, let me say that I don't feel that I am some kind of Jekyll and Hyde in the form of writing essays and writing plays. Both are written by the same man with the same opinions and the same world outlook, but in each case he is moving in a different area of human experience. I see theatre as a genre through which one may shock man, shake up a little bit his psycho-physical apparatus in order to make him better. While the writing of essays uses generalizing language that is used in describing things and expressing opinions. It's simply a different area of human action. Frankly speaking, I would not enjoy writing a play about mass killers or dictators; this idea does not inspire me. I would be interested rather in the plight of ordinary, solid, decent people who . . . from time to time and who may tend to obey dictators.

Q. I would like to refer to an argument, a powerful argument that you make, on the power of empowerment in the post-revolutionary period. I will just summarize. Dissident movements turn away from abstract political visions of the future toward concrete human beings and ways of thinking. Parallel structures in these dissident movements represent expressions of living within the truth. But neither are parallel structures a retreat into a ghetto; they are not exclusive groups with exclusive interests. Rather, they serve as a point of departure. The parallel polis points beyond it itself, and the primary purpose of the outward direction of these movements is to have an impact on the society. That impact is largely indirect, but these movements address the hidden spheres of society; during 1968 gradually these hidden spheres opened out, but they never went further than reform. Two alternatives were then possible for the future: one, the post-totalitarian society would go on developing and snuff out or crush these parallel structures; second, the parallel structures would gradually increase their influence within society. Now, as it turns out, the revolution was neither one of those alternatives. I was struck by the extent to which the culture of these parallel structures was conveyed during and after the revolution broadly. Do you think that this was successful?

A. Without hesitation, I totally regard the overthrow of communism as a success! As for your question, it is more complicated than I can spend much time on. I shall limit myself to one remark concerning it. The experiences of the countries where totalitarian systems ceased to exist rather suddenly, in fact, are in a

way similar. And this applies not only to the post-communist countries of today but also in places like Germany or Austria after the war. And the situation in all those countries is characterized by just one thing, in the very first moments after the fall of the totalitarian system, those who emerge in the forefront of public interest and those who get most of the praise are those who had resisted the totalitarian regime or who were in exile or in concentration camps or who fought the regime, etc. They are the stars of the day, so to say. They get numbers of votes and so are ... to political offices. But there is soon a counter-reaction that comes, and regularly they begin to be shunned from political office again. And there is a reason for that. For, in fact, those who often resisted the totalitarian regime represented a minority which posed to the majority a mirror which the majority did not enjoy looking into. After the first euphoria, the majority, after identifying themselves with that, realizes that many of those who belong to the collaborating majority begin to say that they too were fighting the regime in some ways and tried to join the minority group who did offer resistance. Then the majority realizes that there is a difference between the two and the resistance minority becomes a guilty conscience of the majority. And that is why they tend to drive the representatives of this minority into the background. And it takes several years for the society to become mature enough—and it is also related to the growth of a new generation—to view itself with some reflection and to integrate the guilt which begins to reflect its past. And then comes the period marked by its [word missing]. I realize that I have not given a comprehensive answer to your question, but I believe that I have touched on the reasons that led you to ask it. For, in Czechoslovakia now, there is an impression that the original ideas may be abandoned, and that a purely pragmatic and rational approach, a technical approach, that prevails, and that politicians who want to bring this about are those who did not offer any actual resistance to the former regime. And therefore it's easier for the public [at large] to identify itself with such politicians. In this context there arises the impression as if it were necessary to create new parallel structures, or new dissidents. But it's just this mechanism that I have outlined, and there are many analogies to that in all the countries where a totalitarian regime was overturned.

Palous: I'm sorry that I must interrupt you, but I would like to say something myself. I think that it is quite clear that before the change or the revolution, so-called dissidents are responsible for themselves. The only thing that they had to do was to take care of their own souls or their own culture. After the revolution they were broken up already. They faced power positions. They became ministers, deputy ministers, or whatever, and of course they—presidents—they were immediately made responsible for institutions which in many cases didn't work very well. And, of course, people aroused finally discovered the reasons why they did what they did before was absolutely un-understandable. Because it was readily seen how to get finally to high positions. And the problem I think is that it's a much more difficult job to think about your own soul than to build an institution. Because [name] now speaks—and many others do—about the need to depersonalize post-totalitarian politics. I think that this depersonalization does not mean that this human dimension you are speaking about in the beginning is just to be fully omitted. It means something else. It means that we need institutions, and that we need all the political culture in which these institutions can grow. So, my question is, am I right or wrong, if I don't see the conflict between [person's name's] depersonalization of post-totalitarian politics and your emphasis on personal commitment and responsibility and things like that?

A. It so happens that I spoke to [person's name] and other Polish friends of ours recently, friends who were dissidents, then they held public offices, then they were driven out of them, and now they are holding these offices again. Their situation is... In the discussions I had there, I met with a very lively, very strong feeling for this problem, livelier than is the case in this country. When talking with President Walesa he mentioned this subject time and again, pointing out that we accomplished a post-communist revolution in the name of certain ideals and now we are being replaced by strange people of whom nobody knows anything. And [person's name], when he was exiled, said that in fact we have lost the whole thing. Vaclav Havel, a private person, assured both President Walesa and minister [name] that they see the situation in too dark colors. And as for this depersonalization complex, [name] did not speak to me about that. Certainly he may have meant a number of things; for example, he may have referred to a teacher that characterizes Polish

politics of these days as everyone gets a sort of jealous nose. So, he may have meant by depersonalizing politics that politicians should think less of the persons and devote more time to their work.

P.: I should be happy then to depersonalize myself!

Q.: ... character of politics, especially the character of modern politics, there are now distinctions between the ethics of intention and the ethics of consequences stressed often. . . Modern politics is going to stress necessarily, because of the character of political life,—because it is complicated; you need experts; you need to know the consequences of all intentions. Good intentions are not simply enough. In this situation, of course, it seems that somehow—and that is a theme which in our country is so alive all the time, it's the quote—it's here; this is a country where the morality [of anti-] politics is number one. What I would like to know from you, Mr. President, after your experience, you went through this unbelievable experience. Very soberly expressed, I feel the need for the [missing word], the ethics of responsibility for the intentions, is growing, but at the same this puts a bit aside the ordinary people. I'm worried, because where is then the place for what you call the human element. I see that we are almost fatally moving into a situation where politics becomes a vocation which can be a very difficult case for the people, and there are in the west, as well as here, signs of this change—growing apathy, decreasing participation of people in the west, as we know, is a very serious problem. . . And we know in Hungary and Poland this of course has started there. So, my question, to keep it very simple, is how to balance this human element with an element of understanding, sometimes very professional pressures, ... how to divide the burdens of society. . ? I must admit that this is a thing which worries a lot of people here in this country.

A.: I discern two subjects in your question. The first theme would be the politician as an expert, and the second would be the politician as an ordinary citizen. As for the relationship between a politician and an expert, it has been my experience that a decent politician, who really means to help; who has a sense of responsibility and a sound common sense as well; who is not driven simply by ambition, is always able to find enough experts and to get along very well. While for a stupid...experts would not help. And the third and fourth point is vocation. I believe that politics is a rather special kind of vocation. In my view, politics is not just one profession among other professions. Being a politician is not the same as being a shoemaker or a cybernetics expert. A politician is rather someone who is more intensively and more urgently committed to his being a citizen; who takes more interest in the [missing word], and thus he meddles in politics until he becomes a politician.

Q.: Mr. President, I hear now and throughout our earlier deliberations, a powerful strain of anti-utopianism, which may perhaps be natural in the aftermath of the fall of totalitarianism. But, I'm concerned that in the development of anti-utopianism, there is eclipsed any sense of the notion to provide a defense for strong government. I wonder if you might comment upon that? Is that in some measure the predicament of Czechoslovakia today? Is there an argument for, a defense of strong government in some positive way, or does the fear of utopianism completely eclipse that prospect?

A.: I believe that, if democratic institutions are to be firm, and if the state has to have a frame and be able to vote, there must be something to hold things together. But I believe that ideology is the worst possible instrument of holding things together. I believe that this glue holding things together should be neither an ideology, nor a utopia; because it's certainly easy to invent an ideology or a utopia and have it accepted. But I believe we should follow a more complicated course, and build on our own values and ideas, than on a finished concept that will ultimately replace our values and ideas. Of course it is certainly more difficult to go that way; for if I break everything down to simple theses, there is not much need for thinking; while the other course certainly requires that people think, which is less comfortable, of course. But if one takes the easy way and brings everything down to some simple doctrine, it always turns out against the people and against life in the end.

Q. I'd like to try to formulate a more practical question in some way, especially the conditions, forces, and ideas that you have described in your life work, that you have fought against in that work, and on the other hand, those that you have created, are both before, during, and after the revolution, are rather complex, and rather subtle, at the same time. They have raised profound moral and intellectual questions. My questions is: how do we engage the west, western political leaders and western citizens, especially thinking of my own fellow countrymen in the United States? Because, after having lived and worked here for the past two years, I'm convinced that my countrymen (and I fall into this trap myself) all too often look at these things through very simple lenses, and that we come to very quick conclusions about these very complex ideas and forces and notions. How can we better engage the west in the complexities of this situation, so that we will not think of these things in terms of "we won the cold war," but rather understand that they are more complex issues that will require a qualitatively different and longer and more engaged sense of community between western leaders and leaders of this region during the process of transformation?

A.: Rather than speaking about what you could do to understand better these complex developments, and about the message which these developments are bringing, I shall rather speak about what we can do to make this happen. We should always start with ourselves. I apologize for constantly referring to the famous people I know, but I also spoke recently with President von Weiszaeker, and he told me that a principal problem for Germany today is the fact that nobody is able to explain to the West Germans the East German mentality, and certain complaints that the GDR has not produced a person who would be able to explain this to those in the western provinces of the Federal Republic. But I think that while we are lagging behind in many ways, due to the years of communism, we do possess one experience which [missing words] and which is important in general terms. I believe that we should repay the loans and investments which the west provides us by explaining and articulating this experience. Because this experience concerns the west itself. It is what I would call a general human experience. As to what we could do, the west was for decades getting credit for all the confrontation with communism, inventing ever better armaments and constantly improving their doctrines. But they failed to prepare themselves for a situation when there would be no communism. And it seems that, while what happens has been a fulfillment of what the democratic west was longing for, it has caught most of them unprepared. And it seems to me that the west should seek to get rid of these political stereotypes and of the stereotypes of the sort which marked the period of confrontation or awaiting a confrontation or whatever evolved, and that it should rather attempt to understand the general meaning of what has happened in the post-communist countries. Because certainly that affects the whole world in the present situation; whatever happens in the world affects the whole globe.

Tamas: Mr. President, the party you've been the closest to, in the last election got such a thrashing they didn't even make the parliament. The country of which you've been elected President doesn't exist any longer. Who are you the angriest with?

A.: From time to time I have tried to find an object that I could be angry with, but in the end I always find that I would have to be angry with history, which of course would be nonsense.

Q.: One of the themes in your discussions of identity and responsibility, that American college students have difficulty with, is a preparedness to suffer. As I understand your position is that neither you nor I can compel someone else to self-sacrifice, even for one's own life, but that a preparedness to suffer is one feature of identity and the way in which you discuss it. And it seems to me that you further suggest that if we lived in a world in which no one was prepared to suffer and to shoulder that responsibility, it would be a very impoverished world. I wonder, if there were a group of American students here, would you have better luck than I in getting that point across?

A: I shall try to use a very simple example to make it easier for the students to understand. Let's say to the student, imagine a situation like this—that he's being interrogated, and the interrogator tells him, either you inform on five friends of yours, and if you do that we shall let you go and you can have dinner in your

house this evening. Or, if you refuse, you will be charged and tried and you will stay here for two years. And the person in question hesitates, and finally decides to inform on his friends so that he may have dinner in the evening. Then, after dinner, he finds that he doesn't enjoy the dinner at all. The capability for suffering consists in the capability of recognizing that sometimes we may find prison food more tasty than the best served in a restaurant.

Q.: You spoke a moment ago of western unpreparedness for the end of communism, and of course that's true. We were taken altogether by surprise; we did not think it was going to happen. But the image, the stereotype which has arisen in consequence is very often that half a century of communism froze everything but changed very little. So, when it disappeared, all manner of old problems and old emotions and so forth surfaced. So, one could evaluate communism only in terms of the impaired capacity it had left behind to deal with old problems. Now, I suspect that this is a very inadequate vision of what has happened, and I wonder if you could tell us in what ways the period of communism, in what ways if any, it may be said to have occasioned certain historical developments that would not have existed without it.

A.: It is true that, in the communist countries, history came to a standstill. And when all of a sudden communism disappears, history is revealing itself to us with a certain urgency. And it seems as if in a very nation's going bankrupt, they are remembering their pasts, interests, and territories and borders and various patterns of self-government that once existed, and the long frustration of that natural environment, identity, and the nation's memory, and that supports, thanks to this process of remembering a history, which as we all know is in a way a rather dangerous one. One interesting thing which illustrates how interconnected this world is and how anything that happens anywhere affects the world as a whole consists in the fact that the same thing has happened in the west as well, where we may now see differentiated geopolitical interests and a variety of historical links re-emerging. Because, it seems, that in the west, particularly western Europe, they were frozen by the existence of communism while it existed as a common threat. And now that the threat has disappeared, it seems that it is being de-frozen and starts to remember its own history as well. In both cases, on the one hand, it is right that this happened, because it is bringing societies back to their natural situation and their natural memory. But, on the other hand we can see that it can be very dangerous, too.

Q.: A few months ago you gave an interview to [*Le Monde*] newspaper, and you talked quite movingly about the Czechoslovak ideal. You said there, as you understood, that the Czechoslovak ideal, and the Czechoslovak state, is best not reflecting just ethnic, just religious groups, and so on. And it was something you had said, which was quite similar I thought, two years ago, in parliament, when you said that Czechoslovakia should not be a prison for either Slovak or Czech aspirations—that it had a real meaning in its own sense. Given the events of the last few months, I wonder if you could comment on the reality of the analogy and the future of the Czechoslovak ideal.

A.: It appears that the existence of Czechoslovakia is growing to a close; so, first, one should speak about the sense and the nature of a Czech state and a Slovak state and then about the sense and the nature of their future cooperation. It appears that much of what has been perceived or experienced so far as being Czechoslovak will be through a natural process taken over by the Czech state. A certain relationship to one's own country and identification with a state, if there has been anything. So there has not been much here, for that matter, will probably be converted from an identification with a Czechoslovak statehood into an identification with a Czech statehood, at least, or a Czech environment. Also there will be other elements and other aspects as well, and I believe that this is an important subject that should be talked about at present. For from what we hear in the media, one might get the impression of a change of status, or the end of one state and the emergence of a new one, where nothing but a technical operation has resulted.

Palous: We talked this morning about the problem of democratization of the constitutional process. And I think our biggest problem now is the constitution. Czechoslovakia did not succeed as a federal state to draft and then to pass their constitution. And now I have very mixed feelings observing the [missing word] of the

constitutional process in the present circumstance. My only reservation to the present process is not, as I said here this morning, in the outcome. I really, myself, am very satisfied with being a Czech citizen. But, observing the constitutional process at this moment, and especially vis-a-vis the relation to the existing political situation, I very often put to myself the question whether the god of constitutions (whether some god like that exists or not) does not feel himself offended by the fact that the Czech and Slovak politicians do not pay any respect to the spirit of constitutions. My feeling is that this cannot [but] have a very negative impact on the possibility of Czechs and Slovaks to draft a good, new constitution. My argument is a very practical one; it's not just a little thing called [missing word]. Because I have been observing the process where the political disjunction occurs, and I know that the transition should result in the situation in which, let's say, history as judge can answer all the questions arising in the concrete cases of the citizens brought together [missing word]. So, that's my problem; I don't know the solution. What kind of principles are we to seek to use, if you have this open process of making a constitution democratically. Because in better, more stabilized times, it would be very appropriate to ask some stranger, some expert on constitutions, because when we examine it, people coming from outside were much better disposed to legislate. So, what is your comment to what I have said?

Q.: Could I add a rider to that? Someone coming from another country that may suffer this fate (talking about Canada)—Can I sharpen your point by saying, that, is there some evidence, perhaps, that if this had been put to referenda in the two sides, the result that we now have wouldn't have happened? And if there are grounds for suspecting that—to underline the point that there seems to be a great vice in the way that this has been carried out, one might argue—is the result something that would not have been carried in a referendum?

Q.: ...I think it's a very important point. Already the experiences of the two and a half years, the analysts must arrive at some understanding of the necessary steps or phases of this transformation. It is now quite obvious that if a country doesn't start in the beginning with all the energy it's got with defining its borders, its identity, its roots of life, its institutions, and starts, for example, first at the economy, then other things, it mixes things which simply lead to disaster. I'm extremely worried; we are thinking the same way. We are again, besides that, repeating the troubles which started with the fact that we did not start in '90 with concentration on defining who are we, what are we, where to go. We started to talk about, perhaps, secondary, or subsidiary simpler problems. The danger is extremely big, again, and our politicians, excuse me, are simply not aware of their responsibility. Therefore, I mentioned in the beginning the ethics of responsibility...

Tamas: You know, in Hungary, we did things in exactly the order you propose, and now we are told that it couldn't have been possibly worse!

A.: The problem of the newly emerging Czech state and the arduous part of the Czech constitution is the fact that the Czech state is not arising according to its own will. In fact the Czech state has been founded by Slovaks, in a way. And this [missing word] in our statehood is bringing about a record concord in the process of drafting the constitution, which had become a subject of argument in our growing political parties. And each party is trying to incorporate a paragraph of its own in the constitution, so it may claim to be part of the constitution later. I will now make one more remark, but before proceeding with that, I should like to ask the foreign journalists that are here to close their ears for a moment, for I don't think it would be appropriate if I said to the foreign press something before I say it on my home ground, and I am going to say what I'm going to tell you now on my home ground. It is often said that the Czech republic has a better starting position and more developed economy than the Slovak republic, etcetera. But, it seems that in fact things may turn out the other way around, because of the fact that the slightly authoritarian system that is developing in Slovakia, combined with the Slovak will to have a statehood of their own, these two affect our entire relations, because leaders of the [Slovak] state are often inclined to authoritarian tendencies, [which] might possibly make Slovakia more politically stable and more credible internationally than might be the case with

the Czech republic. Because it might happen on the Czech side that arguments might go on, so on the first of January the Czech republic might arrive at a stage without a constitution. Consequently, foreign countries would have to be wary to conclude treaties with a state that has no constitution of its own. In this respect I am more worried about the Czech republic than the Slovak republic, not because I am a Czech but because I felt about these things this way. And I will certainly raise the subject on the next general level. Now, on the subject of the Constitution, I believe that whatever the politicians have been able to say about the constitution, they have said hundreds of times already. So, I believe that now is the time to bring together three lawyers specializing in constitutional law, put them in a room and then let them write the constitution.

Q.: Other than the fact that the Slovaks have a constitution already, and have a legal basis for their new state, what makes you so confident of the political stability of a future Slovak state, in light of the political leadership and the tensions that currently exist there?

A.: At this rate, when both republics seek to be recognized internationally soon, and rebuild the network of international treaties, which in our case concerns some 2,800 treaties, in a situation when both republics are undergoing an economic transformation and need to cooperate with the advanced countries, in economic sphere; it is important when foreign partners approach us that they meet with a situation where what is expected is also done. In Slovakia, when Mr. Meciar promises something, it is done because of the slightly authoritarian trait that exists in that country; while in the Czech one it is quite possible that a foreign partner approaches one person and he promises something; then he goes to someone else, and he says "Oh! no! That is impossible." So he gets back to the first person, and this person is no longer in the office he held before, and so the foreign partner may be running back and forth and ultimately drop the effort. There's where I see trouble in the making.

Q. I apologize for coming back to a problem which was mentioned and discussed here already; namely, that the west was not prepared for the situation when the Soviet enemy disappeared. Do you mean that we were? That is, our dissident circles and those leaders of the nation, of the inhabitants, who did not submit to the communist ideology and policy—that we were prepared for such a situation? Is not this constitutional predicament of which you are speaking a clue that our being prepared was not far enough accomplished? What do you mean, please?

A.: It's right, that we had not been sufficiently prepared either. But I do not think that, I do not see this unpreparedness exercised during the previous year where we did not write the constitution and the transformation acts and all the different thing which we now need. I rather perceive it as a mental unpreparedness.