

## HAVEL'S 1984 SPEECH

I have been reading Vaclav Havel's "Politics and Conscience", a speech written in 1984 to be delivered at the University of Toulouse. The occasion was the conferral upon him of an honorary doctorate. Unfortunately, authorities in Czechoslovakia, still under Soviet control at the time, denied Havel permission to travel and he was unable to attend the ceremony.

I originally went looking for Havel's speech because I recently came across a reference to it in another essay I was reading. Writing about Gandhi in the May 2, 2011, issue of The New Yorker, Pankaj Mishra likens Gandhi's position toward the modern world to Havel's, as articulated in that 1984 speech. He suggests that like Havel, Gandhi was wary both of ideology and of modernity and pitted the authority of personal conscience against each. That rang true as a characterization of Gandhi. But while I was aware of Havel as a vocal dissident under the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia and as, subsequently, that country's president, I had not thought of him as a critic of modernity *per se*. I was intrigued.

Havel's speech turned out to be easy to find (<http://www.vaclavhavel.cz>). Understanding his position has proved more difficult.

On the surface, the speech reads as an indictment of Soviet totalitarianism as Havel witnessed it in Czechoslovakia. The forced collectivization of agriculture, for example, achieved over a period of thirty years, destroyed centuries of social relations based on family farming and responsible husbandry of the soil. It also badly damaged the environment. But most importantly, in Havel's view, it catastrophically undermined a pre-reflective human relationship with nature, of which Havel conceives as the foundation of moral intuitions and values. Pitted against those and similar developments, personal conscience becomes the vestigial voice of those intuitions. It speaks for a purportedly more ancient and more authentic humanity.

Beneath the surface, however, the modernity against which Havel pits his conscience is not a particular political state at all. It is Western civilization itself, particularly its emphasis on rationality and objectivity at the expense of the personal and subjective.

Havel portrays totalitarianism less as an evil aberration in human political affairs than as a logical consequence of scientific rationalism. The sciences depersonalize the natural world so as to achieve an objective understanding of it. The consequences include the colonization of that world through a more effective exploitation of it. Politics is another face of the same phenomenon. What Galileo does for science, Machiavelli does for politics: he depersonalizes it and thereby recasts it as a technology of power innocent of any human concerns about good and evil. The modern state has its origin in that ancestry. Its totalitarian versions are simply more ruthlessly systematic manifestations of that heritage.

Havel presents the humanity that it behooves one to pit against that evolution as having roots in a more natural state of affairs, one in which relations among human beings and with nature have not yet been divorced from the immediacy of personal experience. Havel paints a picture of a *native* humanity subsequently *colonized* by depersonalizing rationality and objectivity. My intuitive, pre-reflective responses to the world are made to yield to rational reflections that systematically invalidate them. In the process, I am dispossessed of my subjectivity – of my uniqueness, which ends up relegated to the realm of the purely private, to the bathroom, as Havel puts it. It becomes irrelevant to anything that matters. Indeed, bringing it up constitutes a breach of decorum, where proper decorum is deference to the artificial homogeneity of human beings as reflected in the public culture and the public language,

even when the latter is essentially a foreign language.

Although Havel does not use the word 'colonization' when speaking of rationality, it is a useful word for purposes of sharpening one's focus on what it is that makes his thesis provocative. Colonization is by a foreign power that tends to substitute itself for whatever is native, typically not in the interest of the latter but in pursuit of its own. In characterizing rationality as both alien and alienating in relation to genuine humanity, Havel invites the question in what sense it is true that rationality stands to subjectivity as a foreign colonizing power stands to the natives whose culture it displaces and whose resources it exploits for its own purposes.

Gandhi's person may serve to illustrate the point. In his early career, as colonized people often do, he strove to be more English than the English. He typically presented himself, for example, in a well-cut English suit. That stopped in later years. He reverted to native Indian styles of dress, going so far as to spin his own cloth. It seems fair to interpret his behavior in this context as consequent upon his recognition that presenting himself to the world in English dress, never mind taking pride in that appearance, was a betrayal of who he was. It meant assuming a false identity. His own had been colonized, relegated to the bathroom, as Havel might say. Standing up for it, as he eventually did, then comes across as commendable behavior.

On the other hand, Gandhi received a good English education, meaning that he learned to think well and critically, for example, and to express his thoughts and understanding in clear language. His education inculcated respect for rationality, awareness of complexity, and striving for objectivity.

When it comes to politics, a good education tends to confer a measure of immunity to the appeal of popular bad ideas and of simple-minded remedies to social problems. Gandhi was appropriately suspicious, for example, of nationalism and of socialism as solutions to India's troubles. He also opposed the partition of India as a dangerous, though apparently expedient, remedy to its internal religious divisions. The future proved him right on that score. If it is fair to interpret Gandhi's skepticism on these fronts as among the fruits of the good rational education he received, then it makes sense to wonder about the plausibility of a thesis that equates rationality and striving for objectivity with self-alienation and dispossession. In many instances, it seems that the opposite is true, namely that rationality frees people from a prison of prejudices, superstitions, archaic beliefs, and problematic ideologies that, however native, deny them the realization of their full human possibilities.

In short, it seems to be one thing to be illegitimately dispossessed of an identity that is natively one's own, and that is a good thing, and quite another to be done out of a mentality rooted in unchecked subjectivity that makes for crippling limitations in one's sense of the world. And while it would be unfair to characterize Havel as confused about the difference, in reading his speech one senses that he is uncomfortable with it. The cause of his discomfort, I believe, is the immense difficulty of making a rational case for setting limits to the sway of rationality.

Havel is not against science, for example. He is against the depersonalizing of nature on which scientific objectivity depends. But how can you have the first without the second? He is not against rationality either. He is only against the associated devaluation of subjectivity. Again, however, it seems that the two go hand in hand.

Watching him wrestle with this problem, it becomes apparent that the core issue he finds himself up against is the ontological status of value. Are good and evil somehow *real* or are they essentially subjective fantasies? Havel sees the scientific depersonalizing of nature as detrimental to the quality of

human life because its ultimate consequences include an official inventory of reality from which good and evil are absent, as are beauty and ugliness. Similarly, the devaluation of subjectivity offends him because he believes that only a subjectivity unhampered by rationality makes for a receptivity to the foundations of value in nature.

Why exercise oneself about the reality of value? Because absent its reality, human life becomes meaningless. The target of Havel's critique is a world in which that, as he sees it, is well on its way to happening and that is in that sense dehumanizing. He is on a rescue mission to restore good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and so on, to the inventory of real reality. But how bring that off?

Havel tries by telling a story according to which native (pre-rational) humanity confronts the natural world with an appropriate receptivity to the latter's givenness, authority, and mystery.

*“[They] have not yet grown alienated from the world of their actual personal experience, the world which has its morning and its evening, its down (the earth) and its up (the heavens), where the sun rises daily in the east, traverses the sky and sets in the west, and where concepts like "at home" and "in foreign parts," good and evil, beauty and ugliness, near and far, duty and rights, still mean something living and definite. They are still rooted in a world which knows the dividing line between all that is intimately familiar and appropriately a subject of our concern, and that which lies beyond its horizon, that before which we should bow down humbly because of the mystery about it. Our "I" primordially attests to that world and personally certifies it; that is the world of our lived experience, a world not yet indifferent since we are personally bound to it in our love, hatred, respect, contempt, tradition, in our interests and in that pre-reflective meaningfulness from which culture is born. That is the realm of our inimitable, inalienable, and nontransferable joy and pain, a world in which, through which, and for which we are somehow answerable, a world of personal responsibility. In this world, categories like justice, honor, treason, friendship, infidelity, courage, or empathy have a wholly tangible content, relating to actual persons and important for actual life. At the basis of this world are values which are simply there, perennially, before we ever speak of them, before we reflect upon them and inquire about them. It owes its internal coherence to something like a "pre-speculative" assumption that the world functions and is generally possible at all only because there is something beyond its horizon, something beyond or above it that might escape our understanding and our grasp but, for just that reason, firmly grounds this world, bestows upon it its order and measure, and is the hidden source of all the rules, customs, commandments, prohibitions, and norms that hold within it. The natural world, in virtue of its very being, bears within it the presupposition of the absolute which grounds, delimits, animates, and directs it, without which it would be unthinkable, absurd, and superfluous, and which we can only quietly respect.”*

Modern science, by contrast, *“constructing its universally valid image of the world, thus crashes through the bounds of the natural world, which it can understand only as a prison of prejudices from which we must break out into the light of objectively verified truth. The natural world appears to it as no more than an unfortunate leftover from our backward ancestors, a fantasy of their childish immaturity. With that, of course, it abolishes as mere Fiction even the innermost foundation of our natural world; it kills God and takes his place on the vacant throne so that henceforth it would be science which would hold the order of being in its hand as its sole legitimate guardian and be the sole legitimate arbiter of all relevant truth. For, after all, it is only science that rises above all individual subjective truths and replaces them with a superior, supra-subjective, supra-personal truth, which is truly objective and universal.”*

To object to this story that it involves a poetic invoking of the so-called divine command theory of

value, which is notoriously vulnerable to criticism, is to quibble. Havel could rewrite the story with God gone from it, replaced by a perceived order or harmony in nature to which human beings resonate, not because it issues dictates, but because they spontaneously recognize themselves as part of it. The real flaw in the story is that, depending on the examples one chooses to focus on, it does not persuade.

If one chooses to recall one's intense receptivity to the world when one was a child, the story works well enough. Gardens had a loveliness beyond words; some faces glowed with a beauty that took one's breath away. All that being gone, or almost gone as the price of rational and responsible adulthood, can feel like a heartbreaking loss. But recall finding yourself deep in a forest, possibly in the high mountains, and sensing a malign presence lurking there that overwhelmed you with an unspeakable fear, causing you to run away from it in panic, and this archaic receptivity will not seem like such a good thing. It will seem instead like something you are well rid of, even if it happens to be true that what it enabled you to sense is the – in this case ominous – presence of the numinous in nature. You are better off with a rationality that renders you impervious to such presences and immune to their effects. In this case, and in others easy to conjure up, Havel's story does not work so well.

The natural world does not necessarily come across as friendly. It can seem demonic. Nor are exotic experiences in deep forests required to know that. Being caught in a storm on the high seas or in a hurricane usually suffices. Our depersonalizing nature and seeking to understand it scientifically and rationally is our way of coping with that fact, of getting the better of it, or, at least, of holding our own when up against it.

Of course Havel knows all that. His targets are not science and rationality, but the arrogance of the former and the imperialism of the latter. His problem is how to pin down what counts in this context as arrogance and imperialism, and how to curb them. The story he tells suggests where he thinks the answer lies, namely in rescuing value from the ontological trash heap to which science and uninhibited rationality would consign it. But how do that without throwing the baby out with the bathwater? As an answer to that question, I think his story falls short.

I would have preferred Havel telling a slightly different story.

In a world without value science has no value. A science that removes value from the inventory of reality in the name of objectivity, either directly or by the attitude toward nature that it presupposes, shoots itself in the foot as a meaningful enterprise. Moreover, if it is true that value is inseparably entwined with subjectivity, then a rationality that devalues subjectivity runs the risk of rendering itself pointless. In the name of what value and authority does it devalue subjectivity when it itself possesses what value and importance it has only by the grace of the latter?

Arrogance has something to do with thoughtless overreaching. The line between science and arrogance lies at the point where science, in the name of objectivity, denies legitimacy to any cognitive enterprise other than itself. When only scientific knowledge counts as bona-fide knowledge, and all other cognitive endeavors are dismissed as opinion, speculation, or philosophy, and their results not in any case worthy of being deferred to, then, since value is not a possible object of scientific knowledge, science runs the risk of writing itself out of the catalogue of worthwhile activities. Indeed, that catalogue disappears altogether: if value has no reality, then there are no worthwhile activities. A culture that privileges science in that sense consequently runs the risk of denying value to all human endeavors – the risk, in other words, of depriving itself of a conception of human life as meaningful.

Similarly, when it comes to rationality in general, it makes sense to speak of misguided imperialism

when rationality denies legitimacy to dimensions of the cognitive enterprise that warrant its own pursuit. That pursuit cannot underwrite itself. It depends for its existence and importance on its being perceived as valuable. It is not rationality that can certify that it itself is valuable, as though that were an objective, impersonal, and dispassionate truth. It is human beings who see value in it because they have purposes and passions that rationality serves that are not necessarily rational at all. The truth may be rational, but loving it or passionately pursuing its discovery are not. There is nothing impersonal or dispassionate about love or passion. Moreover, they are both firmly rooted in subjectivity which it is therefore not in the interest of rationality to denigrate lest it undermine the basis of its own pursuit. And a culture that wants only to be rational, and that dismisses anything not underwritten by rationality as less worthy of deference than what is, therefore risks, once again, rendering its own rational endeavors incomprehensible to itself. In addition, unless one believes – implausibly to my mind – that the foundations of value are rational, that same culture risks doing itself out of an understanding of human life as meaningful.

Unfortunately, arrogance and imperialism are not curable by *fiat*. It will not do to simply decree that science or rationality will henceforth stop short of making extravagant claims on territory that, were they allowed to conquer it, would undermine their status as meaningful endeavors, to say nothing of the damage such conquests would wreak on human life in the culture as a whole. As a matter of fact, nothing will do that falls short of restoring value to a *bona fide* place in the inventory of reality.

While it seems to me that Havel is right in suggesting that that means rescuing subjectivity from second-class citizenship in the cognitive scheme of things, I think that, absent a willingness to allow our picture of objective reality to become considerably more disconcerting than it is, any endeavor to do so will fail. In the story that Havel tells, value is indeed present in the natural world, part of its inventory, but as sensed by a subjective receptivity that no poetic rhetoric has the power to elevate into more than a primitive and irrational type of cognition. Not to put too fine a point on it, according to the modern world view its objects have no existence; they are ghosts. Neither science nor rational minds believe in ghosts. The challenge, therefore, is to show that ghosts exist, not just in our subjective dreams, but in real reality, and that we depend on them in making sense of our world and of ourselves. That challenge is not adequately met by arguing, as Havel does, that in some putative primordial time, all people saw them, or that each of us still does when we are children.

Good and evil, beauty and ugliness, are ghostlike realities. Now you see them, now you don't. Or, you see them where I don't, and I where you don't. Their ontological stability coincides with that of passion, which, depending on which passion you think of, seems to come and go just as they do. It seems invariably individual and as unstable as individuals themselves.

Now it is possible to argue (as I have here in the past) that all human beings at all times are in the grip of an ultimate passion, finding a focus here and there, in this or that object, shifting it to another, but always present like an unquenchable thirst, and that value, generally conceived, is the object of that thirst. So conceived, it makes for a pretty stable and indeed ubiquitous reality in human affairs.

In any case, however, the more critical point is that we experience the objects of our passions as real and that our passions are not merely incomprehensible, but phenomenologically impossible, absent a perception of their objects as having a reality independent of them. By the 'objects' of passion, I mean good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and so on, understood as qualities had by what is normally called an object. I love a person's beauty, or her goodness, or her charm, for example. They are the objects of my passion. When I say that I love *her*, I mean that I love what I see through eyes animated by that passion, namely a beautiful, or good, or charming woman, or all three.

Similarly, when I detest an act that I perceive as unjust, the object of my passion, negative in this case, is the injustice, or the ugliness, or the evil that I perceive through eyes animated by that passion.

While I may find reassurance in all these contexts by others seeing what I see, thus validating my perception, I am not greatly troubled when they do not. To be sure, I may try to persuade them, at least when I see injustice and because I want something done about it, or I may listen to them trying to talk me out of seeing injustice where they think there is none, but I generally know what I see when I see it. Unless it turns out that I am mistaken about some fact or some feature of a situation, I will keep seeing it no matter what anyone else sees or does not. And, more importantly, I do not have the option of sustaining my passion by telling myself that its object does not exist in real reality.

If no one besides me sees the woman I love as lovely, it is not an option to tell myself that her loveliness is my subjective doing – a projection or reification, say, of my passion for her. The moment I succeed in convincing myself of that, my passion disappears. Just so, if someone convinces me that an act I perceive as unjust is not, my detestation of it disappears, at least insofar as its object is the act's injustice. In order to sustain my passion phenomenologically, I have to believe that the object of my passion possesses a reality independent of it.

Now one may argue that this phenomenological fact is just that, an accident of psychology, so to speak, and that, as such, it has no implications for what is really real. But why argue that, except in the service of an agenda to limit the really real to what everyone can see through eyes not animated by passion? One might well ask what passion animates *that* agenda if not discomfort with a world in which real realities appear and disappear, visible to some but not to others, and in which what counts as real reality is no more than the accidental public intersection of private perceptions and the shared passions that animate them. The irony in that agenda is that we all share it to the detriment of our own subjectivity, the cognitive status of which it systematically invalidates except where our passions match everyone else's. Value gets written out of the inventory of reality in the interest of a putative homogeneity that serves the interests of social control, but at the price of our individual humanity and of the meaning of our individual lives.

To a man who loves it and her, the beauty of a particular woman is more real than the sun in the sky. To teach him that that beauty is essentially a private illusion unsupported by science or rationality, which happen to be the only means of access to real reality, is to turn the meaning of his life into an illusion. And to tell a man who detests injustice when he sees it that there is no room in the official inventory of reality for evil because it is a value, and values have no objective existence, brings him to the edge of thinking that human life is absurd and his striving idiotic. Such a man might be forgiven for thinking instead that that official inventory is absurdly incomplete.

Both men are up against the cognitive ideology of Western civilization in its denial of legitimate cognitive status to passion and emotion. Much can be said for its success. But so can much be said for the effectiveness of totalitarian governments in achieving social, economic, or political objectives by riding roughshod over the rights, interests, and dignity of individuals. Yet while we bristle at that, and never tire of dismissing that effectiveness as achieved at the expense of humanity, we would not dream of indicting our own analogous striving for homogeneity and social control at the expense of humanity. Indeed, we pride ourselves on its supposedly benign effectiveness and on the order that rationality and the celebration of objectivity enable us to impose. Unfortunately for us, the ultimate price of that order is the loss of meaning in human life.

I suspect that Havel would accept that emendation of his story or even insist that, apart from some philosophical details, it is no more than he said himself. The real problem comes next.

When one thinks of a man loving a woman or detesting injustice, it seems that the ideology of Western civilization would not be especially stressed by having to concede that not just his passion but its object is real, even if that meant accepting that passion and emotion have a cognitive dimension the acknowledgement of which mandates some revisions in what counts as real. To be sure, that makes for a somewhat different cognitive ideology and a rather more complex inventory of reality, but the effects of the change seem generally untroubling.

Unfortunately, where one man sees injustice, another may see the opposite. No amount of argument or discussion may settle the disagreement. What is the upshot in practice if we concede that the passions on each side are equally legitimate and their objects equally real? Probably violence. What puts the brakes on violence now is the conviction, rooted in rationality, that they cannot both be right. While each side believes sincerely that it is right and the other wrong, the abstract possibility that the opposite may be true, or that neither is right, suffices to take some of the wind out of the sails of a passion otherwise on its way to destructive rage. Marginalizing rationality in such contexts removes the brakes.

Examples are not far to seek. What was the Cold War but a world-wide confrontation, untempered by rationality, between different convictions about what constitutes an economically just society? The world escaped total nuclear annihilation by a mere hair's breadth.

Even in an individual life, the relative instability and unpredictability of passion can make for a degree of self-destructive disorder the undesirability of which is hard to redeem by invoking its human authenticity and the meaning with which passions episodically or serially endow that life. Privileging passion at the expense of rationality in such contexts sounds like a recipe for making human life worse rather than better.

Caught in this individual and collective conceptual dilemma, I would like to suggest that we may be able to navigate between its horns by finding our way to a different understanding of rationality.

It seems to me that the price we have to pay for restoring the objects of passion to the pantheon of reality are huge individual efforts to exercise personal responsibility as contributing progenitors to the existence of those objects.

The objects of passion – perceived beauty and goodness, for instance – come into being at the same time as our passion for them. That passion is not their only parent, however. Their other parent is some hospitable configuration of reality. I cannot see beauty wherever I please. I cannot love whatever I choose. By virtue of its structure, existing independently of me, some configuration of reality has to lend itself to being seen as beautiful or to being loved. Which configurations so lend themselves depends in no small measure on the unique person that I am. In any case, however, beyond being the unique person that I am, there is absolutely nothing that I can do to affect the potential parental contribution of independent reality to the genesis of the objects of my passion.

That does not mean, however, that I find myself absolutely helpless and at the mercy of reality when it comes to that genesis. While it is true that I cannot and do not will them, it is also true that my passions do not simply happen to me. At the simplest level, I contribute to their birth by being receptive to the inviting hospitality of independent reality. I walk about alert to its putting in an appearance, seeking it out, always on the prowl for an encounter that will bring me to life as a being who feels, superbly wired to sense and to feel, if only the right object will present itself. If there is a passion that simply happens to me, that is the only one, namely the passion for passion, for quickening and intense life, that

constantly has me being on the lookout for it. It happens to me because that is what it is to be human, to *be* that passion.

At a more complex level, I contribute to the genesis of particular objects of passion by being the person that I am. I resonate to some things and not others. Which I resonate to depends on how I think, on my circumstances, on what I understand, on how well I know myself and what I seek, and, broadly speaking, on my sense of the world and of human life. And while there are limits to what I can do to affect all those things, there is plenty that I can do.

I can make it my business to learn to think clearly about some things, like justice, or beauty, or love, for example. Doing so will change what I resonate to, positively and negatively. Attending to my economic circumstances may result in my being less susceptible to the appeal of wealth or to that of social reforms likely to translate into injustices to other people in the same society. I can strive to know myself a little better. If I succeed, I will stop prowling for objects of passion in places where I have good reasons to believe they are not to be found, at least not by me, given what I know about myself, and limit my search to more propitious environments. Finally, I can take on the task of getting a grip on human life, including my own, understand it as a thirst for living, but understand as well that while there are many ways of slaking it, not all will do so equally or optimally.

Whether one sees all of these as behaviors ultimately driven by my passion for living and thus not fully within my discretion, or understands them instead as deliberate efforts at responsible creativity and husbandry in relation to the genesis of the objects of my passions, makes little difference to the fact that efforts are required in any case, and that if there is a way of exercising responsibility in this connection, it consists of making them. If I dislike a rationality that devalues my subjectivity, or a society that dehumanizes us all by limiting the meaning of our lives to such as they may have by virtue of the accidental intersection of our individual passions, then it behooves me to do what I can to insure that the alternatives to all that are not practically impossible or more likely to prove even more destructive to the quality of human life than what they would replace. And what I can do is to bring my pro-creative capacities in relation to objects of passion under some civilized and civilizing control.

Unless I think carefully about the nature of justice, I will see injustices where there are none. If my neighbor falls short on the same front, so will he. If rationality as a radical invalidator of passion is put out of business, the resulting conflicts are likely to destroy us both. The only alternative is to reinstall rationality as a positive sense of responsibility, one that is driven by the understanding that I have a stake, not only in a just society, but in bringing it about by moderating my passion for it, first of all, by knowing what constitutes a just society and what I love about it, and second by doing what I can to insure that my neighbor knows it as well. And notwithstanding my certainties, I will also think very carefully before leading charges in the name of justice and prefer non-adversarial dialogue whenever possible.

A passion for a better world owes it to itself to be responsible about itself by knowing what it is about. Pursuing it in the name of humanity mandates knowing as well what *that* is about and how to avoid doing damage to anyone's humanity. That is a lot to know. Knowing it presupposes, of course, that knowledge about such matters is possible in the first place, which it isn't unless good and evil are real.

Havel, too, speaks of personal responsibility. He conceives of it, I think, somewhat more heroically than I do, and of its exercise as rather less complex. You stand up for what your conscience tells you. Although it is not necessarily a safe thing for you to do, it is safest for everyone else. While I admire both his courage and the fastidiousness of his concern for others, I am afraid that, Gandhi's example

notwithstanding, the chances of success on a large scale by those means are slight.

Perhaps that is not being fair to Havel. After all, he does not just stand up. He also thinks carefully and wrestles tenaciously with the daunting conceptual problems we face in keeping our world from spinning into oblivion. That is a bid to get a dialogue going – a benign, non-violent revolution, if you will, as opposed to the bloodbath we are likely eventually to face unless it takes place.

Havel lives his passions for that revolution in public, responsibly. At some risk to his credibility, especially in a speech that was to be delivered before an academic audience, he calls into question the tendency of science to morph into a an unhealthy religion, and that of rationality to degenerate into a pointless mental mannerism posturing as intellectual probity. Although it does not answer all the questions it raises, his speech places them before our eyes. I strongly recommend it.

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