

Personal Responsibility: Hayek and Havel in a Christian Perspective

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What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.

(Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 263¹)

The real question is whether the ‘brighter future’ is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?

(Václav Havel, *Living in Truth*, p. 122²)

A simple response to the words of MacIntyre and Havel would run: MacIntyre is wrong and Havel right. MacIntyre is the typical western academic, luxuriating in rhetorical pessimism about the West, a parasite denigrating the liberal system of democratic capitalism on which he depends for the very freedoms he enjoys. Since he wrote in 1981 the vitality of liberal democratic capitalism has been amply demonstrated. It now has no serious rival. The fraud and corruption of socialism has been exposed. Marxist economics have collapsed. Even Mikhail Gorbachev advocated a market economy and personal initiative. Václav Havel by contrast has had to fight in the real world for freedom. He knows from experience what he is talking about because he has dissented from a dead and deadening regime in the name of creativity, freedom, the independence of social life, and above all truth. He and his fellow dissidents embody the brighter future into which we are free to move.

Such a response would have a measure of truth, and yet still be superficial. In the field of social and political theory there is a very lively debate at present about liberalism. Its most doughty defenders include Sir Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Friedrich Hayek and Robert Nozick. Its critics, apart from Alasdair MacIntyre, number Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Brian Lee Crowley and Thomas Spragens.³ In entering this debate in some detail I shall focus on Hayek, because he devoted a lifetime to the refutation of socialism and to the elaboration of a social,

political and economic theory of great distinction. Moreover, his thought has been partly translated into practice, with visceral and some cerebral vigour, within Britain and promoted with missionary zeal on a European, nay global, scale. I shall show from the debate, especially by reference to Crowley, how Hayek's philosophy is wanting, especially in his understanding of the self, reason and responsibility.

I shall then draw in Havel, and show how his critique of post-totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe also strikes home in the West, and that Hayek's philosophy is more part of the problem than a resource for dealing with it. I shall draw out the affinities between Havel and Crowley, and try to show that both positions, while not overtly Christian, have deep resonances with fundamental aspects of the Christian faith.

I shall not quite be claiming that Václav Havel is St Benedict *redivivus*. But at least I aim to show the essential complementarity of Havel and the western critics of liberalism, and the illumination which they can jointly throw on our responsibilities at this time of common crisis.

Friedrich A. von Hayek considers himself primarily a social philosopher.⁴ How, for him, does society come into being? Human beings are each a bundle of private desires, wants and goals, which they seek to satisfy as far as possible. They are, however, limited in their knowledge and means to do so. Their attempts lead to unintended and undesirable consequences. They collide with each other in their striving for satisfaction. They need to pool their knowledge and efforts and cooperate under common rules of behaviour.

Hayek sees two possible bases for this social cooperation. One is for a person or group to prescribe and impose goals on the whole. We tend indeed to assume that society needs conscious goals, and that institutions must be invented to further them. But this is not necessary, according to Hayek. There can be institutions that are not invented or planned, but nonetheless are structured. They arise like a footpath. Nobody intends to create a footpath, only to make his or her individual walk easier. As more and people follow in each other's tracks, so they ease the journey of everyone in the future. So the resultant footpath is not planned, but it is beneficial. Hayek believes basic social institutions to be of this kind. We can have an overall order, while allowing for individuals to use their own knowledge in pursuit of their private goals.

Human beings are hedonists, seeking to maximise the satisfaction of their wants. They also have a rational faculty, which enables them to see that the aggregate of wants they can satisfy in a social environment is greater than what they could achieve outside society. The price of this gain is that they must give up those wants which are anti-social.

Through experience people come to appreciate the value of cooperation for them as individuals, and they retain successful modes of cooperation. The rules of social cooperation are the unintended but indispensable product of ever more successful experiments in social cooperation.

Launched on this evolutionary trajectory, society will progress as people acquire more knowledge of each other and of their environment, and make the most of their circumstances. The eventual result is the Great or Open Society. Primitive societies were closed societies, based on face-to-face contact and commonly accepted goals. They used resources inefficiently and stifled initiative, obstructing the desires of human beings to seek the greatest satisfaction for the least effort, and frustrating the accumulation and transmission of knowledge. In the Great Society there are no concrete collective goals, only abstract rules that coordinate human effort in the most effective way, so that individuals can satisfy their nature as utility maximisers. It is in these abstract rules, therefore, that justice is located.

Individual wants are sovereign. 'The individual deserves respect *qua* man, and as such must be given the right to free development, power over his destiny, choice and responsibility.' The task of the individual is to develop rationality and exercise choice within the rules of the Great Society. In this way he will become responsible and morally fulfilled.

Society is morally justified and political obligation exists to the extent that a human being may pursue self-chosen goals. Liberty is defined by Hayek as 'the state in which a man is not subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another or others'. The prescription of concrete goals is, in Hayek's sense, coercion; the formulation of abstract rules that facilitate the free pursuit of goals by individuals is not.

It is worth noting the interdependence of the individual and society, in the sense that each individual is dependent on the evolution of the society into which he is born. For the society contains institutions that embody and reflect the wisdom distilled from the countless social experiments made by preceding individuals. Even more fundamentally, the individual simply would not exist had not his society been successful in the competitive struggle for survival.

What mechanism, then, will respect the nature of society and of human beings within it, and afford them the best means of attaining the greatest aggregate utilities and therefore the greatest personal fulfilment? The market. The market copes with our inescapable ignorance in a way a central economic planner could not. The price system signals to individuals in the market-place what range of wants others have and the extent to which they desire them to be satisfied. The communications system that we call the market 'turns out to be a more efficient mechanism for digesting dispersed information than any man has deliberately designed'.

The market also allows producers to compare various scarcities and demands and to work out the most efficient and least costly way to produce goods. Efficiency depends on an open and competitive market, so that experimentation and innovation will flourish.

Moreover, the market respects the nature of society and the individuals within it. Its mechanisms are entirely individualistic. It has no single aim or purpose, nor is it the creation of any conscious design or planning. It is a spontaneous phenomenon, like society itself. It is structured and orderly, not by design, but through the emergence of general rules, like property and contract. Within it, individual wants are sovereign. Individuals are free to frame and pursue their own ends and purposes. The values of things in the market are therefore entirely subjective.

The greatest strength of the market order is that people can cooperate in it, even though they do not share common aims; all they need is agreed procedures or rules for the market. Through them it secures to the members of society the best chance of achieving their different and largely unknown particular ends.

Sir Isaiah Berlin once advised:

The ideas of every philosopher concerned with human affairs in the end rest on his conception of what man is and can be. To understand such thinkers, it is more important to grasp this central notion or image, which may be implicit, but determines their picture of the world, than even the most forceful arguments with which they defend their views and refute actual and possible objections.⁵

We need to unearth Hayek's understanding of the self and test its adequacy. This can best be done by investigating his concepts of reason and responsibility in each of two dimensions of his philosophy, the utilitarian and the libertarian. For Hayek tries

to marry utilitarianism to a concept of the individual who is to be valued in himself as a locus of freely willed choice.⁶ This investigation will carry us into the basic question of the adequacy of his theory of knowledge.

First is the utilitarian dimension. It is useful to make a distinction first between a weak and a strong sense of reason. The weak sense, which can be called rationality, is the faculty of calculation over the means to the realisation of a goal. The stronger sense, for which we will retain the word reason, covers the capacity to justify our action. If we say a person acted rationally in performing a certain moral or political action, we would usually mean not only that he acted in a way that was explicable to others in society, but also that in principle he could justify it by offering an account of why the action is consistent with a larger framework of goals and values which he holds.⁷

Hayek's self is plainly a rational calculator. The rational self with a given set of wants will, within the constraints imposed by information costs, try to achieve the greatest number of most desired goals at least cost to himself. To do this the self will evaluate different courses of possible action, and so be able to offer an account of why he acted as he did. But does this talk of 'evaluation' and 'account' add up to justification by the exercise of reason? There does seem to be a crucial difference between Hayek's view and what we normally mean by justification. This is very important because reason and rationality taken together carry a moral force that rationality alone lacks.⁸

One sign of the inadequacy of Hayek's view of the self is his treatment of conflicting desires. The ultimate measure of desirability for Hayek is social utility. Now the individual may have desires that conflict with long-term social survival. On Hayek's reckoning this conflict is a sign of imperfect rationality, a miscalculation about utility maximisation. The individual's responsibility is to overcome his desire to maximise his short-term satisfactions through a stricter application of the yardstick of social utility.⁹ Yet this approach cannot cope with the problem of the weakness of the will. The familiar problem is a conflict between our ideals and our wants. We have an idea of the sort of values we wish to exemplify in our lives, of the sort of person we wish to be, and this is often in conflict with other desires. The problem cannot be reduced to a matter of calculations.¹⁰

The central difficulty is that Hayek simply takes desires as given. The only question is how I can get what I want or need. He assumes the commensurability of these wants in a single calculus. What we need, however, is a sense of a deeper self that holds itself responsible for the desires it has and asks 'Why do I want or need that?', 'Ought I to desire it?' and 'Who am I that I want or need it?' The point here is that there is a strong relationship between the moral subject and his actions, which involves an interior stance of owning those actions. To be a fully responsible person means to be able to give an account of one's actions in the sense of justifying them; and that entails the ability to 'step back' and reflect on oneself, to make oneself at the same time both subject and object of one's own thoughts. In other words, to question whether one ought to do something entails a critical relationship to one's own self, one's actual self and the kind of self that one ideally wants to be. This capacity for depth is characteristic of persons, and distinguishes them from robots. It is a capacity that is neglected in Hayek's account of the self.¹¹

Second is the libertarian dimension. We now turn to Hayek's concept of the individual who is to be valued in himself as a locus of freely willed choice. This is the liberal view that (as Sir Isaiah Berlin expresses it) all men are essentially 'autonomous beings – authors of values, of ends in themselves, the ultimate authority of which

consists . . . in the fact that they are willed freely.' This ethical liberalism attempts to give a moral foundation to a political theory that prizes the individual and his freedom while preserving the idea that certain things are to be valued in themselves. It posits that human beings are self-motivating and self-determining: ultimate values are individual human beings and the values they freely choose.¹²

Once again we have to ask about meaning and adequacy – in this case in the concept of 'freely choosing'. The liberal notion of the self is of a lower empirical self, which is the source of passions and desires, and a higher reasoning self. The latter consists in an ability to reason about what our values ought to be and an ability rationally to choose our values and to will that they inform our life. We are the authors of our own values, and therefore free, insofar as we subjugate our lower empirical self to our higher reasoning one. We have to distance ourselves from all that is contingent, the empirical world, the world of experience and attachments, to give full rein to our ability to reflect, calmly and reasonably, on what our values ought to be.¹³

Here we certainly encounter notions not only of calculative rationality, but also of reason as a higher, abstract, reflective capacity by which, for example, we arrive at an understanding of what is just and fair. Liberal man is responsible, too, in that he chooses what his values are to be, and can offer an account that would be intelligible to other rational human beings.

This position is undoubtedly very Kantian. Hayek gives Kant a peculiar twist in that he offers a schema which, under the influence of David Hume, grounds the abstract principles of justice in a spontaneously grown order, whose paradigm is the market. He invites his readers to assent to the superior rationality of the market. The market takes no cognisance of the ends of those who enter it, but indicates the direction of rational choice. Hayek is intensely sceptical about individual rationality. There is a wisdom in the spontaneous order of the market that is inaccessible to rational analysis by individuals. Accept it, and it will improve the chances of any individual chosen at random to realise his self-chosen ends. No agreement on the good is necessary: rather the spontaneous order makes use of more knowledge than men could ever do, and people can be left to discover the good for themselves within the framework for choice offered by just institutions. They can use their rationality to subordinate their primitive, anti-social self to the discipline of the market order.¹⁴

This account is certainly not wholly false. We need an account of how human beings can overcome the passions and desires which conflict with what we are rationally convinced is our good; otherwise we are slaves. The central difficulty, however, is that Hayek posits an ideal of a self which is a radically individuated subject of choice unencumbered by desires or attachments. The self certainly *has* desires, but there is a pure choosing self at the core, which is not itself bound up with the desires among which it must choose.¹⁵

This is an exceedingly thin notion of the self. Ordinarily we consider ourselves to include our desires and passions. Yet here we have a pure self prior to all goals, aims and affections. But 'to imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments . . . is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth.' This self then chooses a set of values. But one wonders what is meant by such a self making a choice of its values, if it has no background, ties or commitments. How can the choice be other than arbitrary or capricious? To carry moral force, a choice must be more than an expression of preference between alternatives. It requires a responsible assessment of alternatives and an attempt to integrate particular choices within a larger existing framework of

values. This kind of choice really does engage the self as a person, and carries with it a special internal relationship with the choice. An arbitrary choice, by contrast, cannot give us any clue to the character, depth and moral worth of the subject.¹⁶

The truth of this becomes evident when we notice that the liberal talks as if human beings can experiment with various ways of living and reject those that do not suit them, remaining untouched by the experience. I may well, it is true, think nothing of changing from wearing jeans to a suit, but many experiments engage the person in a fundamental way, and failure leaves its scars, as anyone with pastoral experience will testify. Hayek, in his anti-individualistic, evolutionist vein, writes as if the species progresses through continual experimentation that is free of cost. But, as Crowley says,

Men ought to be diminished by their unworthy deeds and exalted by their worthy ones in a much more deeply engaged sense than that of 'experimentation' implies. If this was all there was to men's lives, they could not be judged as individuals by what they had done and still less would they be expected to bear an enduring responsibility for certain kinds of 'failed experiments'.¹⁷

No doubt there is a place for detachment from circumstances in order to think calmly and coolly. But it is a limited place. In many professional situations (e.g. a judge hearing a case, a social worker dealing with a problem family) we need a degree of detachment from personal feelings. In the market place we agree to let certain aspects of our relationships be governed by impersonal functioning of the price mechanism. But to extend that practice to all relationships with people would be cold and inhuman. There are contexts where such an objective approach would actually destroy the very essence of human relationships. In Crowley's view, Hayek's liberalism, carried to its logical conclusion, would imply the near universalisation of the objective perspective. But 'our commitment to participating in intersubjective relationships – with all the range of emotions, ties and commitments that implies – is simply too deep-seated and all-pervasive.'¹⁸

These reflections on Hayek's concept of the self take us on to his theory of knowledge. Since the Renaissance, western philosophy has been dogged by a question that also preoccupied the Greeks: where is certain knowledge to be found? Since appearances can be deceptive, certain knowledge could only be had in abstraction from the empirical world, in tautologies or the truths of mathematics.

The European Enlightenment, from which liberalism sprang, attempted to establish roads to self-knowledge, including the principles of morality, which would be equally independent of experience. Descartes' '*Cogito ergo sum*' is the classic expression of this temper. From the certain intuition of himself as a thinking being all else that was certainly true could be deduced.

The assumption thus developed of the superiority of abstract knowledge, independent of the snares of individual experience. The scientific method was inescapably more involved in the empirical world than mathematics, but it could approximate because it entailed the extraction of abstract propositions from the contingent.¹⁹

The Enlightenment project, as Alasdair MacIntyre brilliantly shows, started in a blaze of optimism, but was destined to go through various crises and divisions.²⁰ Thomas Spragens has pointed out that two models of reason have come down to us.

The technocratic conception retains the belief that scientific critical reason can ascertain principles for governing political and moral action, but it has

departed from the earlier conception of liberal reason by regarding access to these truths as limited to a relatively small elite who have mastered the tools of critical reason; the political models generated by this tradition have, therefore, tended to be authoritarian and tyrannical in varying degrees. The value non-cognitivist conception . . . has retained the idea that true knowledge is certain, precise and objective, but it too has departed from the earlier paradigm by denying that political and moral principles are accessible to reason so conceived.²¹

Hayek has a distinctive version of this value non-cognitivism. For him the most certain knowledge we have of the world is that which is distilled impersonally from human experience within the spontaneous order of the market. It is a wisdom far more extensive than that open to individuals to understand. Human beings will attain the greatest wisdom if they accept this order and pursue utility.

Hayek completely separates this public pursuit of utility from the pursuit of the good. We cannot have knowledge of the good at all, since it depends on a purely subjective valuation. The consequence is that there is no chance of any claim to knowledge of the good winning the assent of rational men. It is therefore irrational and a species of coercion to attempt to govern society by a particular idea of the good. Rather it must be governed by an abstract procedure which permits each to determine for himself what desires he can most usefully pursue, compatibly with a like freedom for everyone else.²²

And so we have in Hayek a public arena of objectivity, where we are guided by abstract procedural justice and by utility, set against a private arena, where individuals decide for themselves entirely subjectively the goods they wish to pursue. The hints Crowley has given of an adequate concept of the self carry with them the rejection of such a bifurcation. But the point can be made forcefully if we now draw in Václav Havel.

Václav Havel's *Living in Truth* (a collection of six texts written between 1975 and 1985) is a brilliant exposé of the dead and corrupting order of what he calls post-totalitarianism. 'It is the worst in us,' he writes to Dr Gustav Husák, 'which is being systematically activated and enlarged – egotism, hypocrisy, indifference, cowardice, fear, resignation and the desire to escape every personal responsibility.'²³ Yet embodied within his critique, as we shall presently see, are remarks which suggest that there is a common crisis confronting Eastern and Western Europe. 'Do we [in Eastern Europe] not in fact stand (although in the external measures of civilisation, we are far behind) as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies?'²⁴

The heart of the matter he locates in 'the automatism of technological civilisation and the industrial-consumer society'. A common feature of this evil is the exercise of impersonal power. In Eastern Europe the post-totalitarian system is utterly obsessed with the need to bind all the expressions and aims of life to the spirit of its own aims: the vested interests of its own smooth, automatic operation. Everyone and everything is caught up in the regulatory tangle of red tape inevitably produced by a bureaucratic system. This system has promoted a technological era symbolised by the smokestack soiling the heavens. Those conscripted into a technological mentality can conceive of a remedy for these ills only within the limits of technology: a catalytic scrubber fitted to the chimney.²⁵

In another direction the totalitarian state uses the power of industrial technology to promote consumerism. Abandoning any hope of general reform, citizens compliantly divert their energies to the material aspects of their private lives. The authorities are

relieved at this escape from the sphere of public activity and offer people not free economic decision-making, free participation in politics and free intellectual advancement, but the chance freely to choose which washing machine or refrigerator they want to buy. 'In the interest of the smooth management of society, then, society's attention is deliberately diverted from itself. By nailing a man's whole attention to the floor of his mere consumer interests, it is hoped to render him incapable of appreciating the ever-increasing degree of his spiritual, political and moral degradation.' The system 'drives each man into a foxhole of purely material existence'.²⁶ Havel writes of 'the profound crises of human identity brought on by living within a lie. . . . A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilisation, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival, is a *demoralised* person.'²⁷

The root of this malaise for Havel is the triumph of objectivity: the scientific (more accurately pseudo-scientific) model of the world replaces all individual subjective truths with trans-subjective and trans-personal truth that is truly objective and universal. It is free of the whims of subjectivity, and as such impersonal and inhuman. Norms have been relegated to a merely private concern, 'personal conscience and consciousness to the bathroom, as something so private that it is no one's business'.

Man rejected his responsibility as a 'subjective illusion' – and in place of it installed what is now proving to be the most dangerous illusion of all: the fiction of objectivity stripped of all that is concretely human, of a rational understanding of the cosmos, and of an abstract schema of putative 'historical necessity'. As the apex of it all, man has constructed a vision of a purely scientifically calculable and technologically achievable 'universal welfare' . . . Science, objectivity. . . technology. . . those, being impersonal, cannot worry. They are abstract and anonymous, ever utilitarian and thus also ever *a priori* innocent.

Behind the mask of the modern politician is only a more or less competent power technician, and power is *a priori* innocent because it does not grow from a world in which words like guilt and innocence retain their meaning.²⁸

Havel's chief target is undoubtedly the post-totalitarian state of Eastern Europe. Yet he has the knack of making the western reader feel uncomfortable. And in case we start exempting ourselves, we have his explicit words:

I think that, with respect to the relation of Western Europe to the totalitarian systems, no error could be greater than the one looming largest: that of a failure to understand the totalitarian systems for what they ultimately are – a convex mirror of all modern civilisation and a harsh, perhaps final call for a global recasting of that civilisation's self-understanding.²⁹

In western democratic societies human beings may enjoy many personal freedoms and securities unknown in Eastern Europe. The violence done to human beings is not nearly so obvious and cruel. Yet violence there is, and subtle and refined ways of manipulation. Matching the automatism of the bureaucratic system in the East are 'those complex focuses of capital accumulation engaged in secret manipulations and expansion; the omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture'. Havel believes that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technology

and the industrial-consumer society; for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it.³⁰

If Havel is right in this then is there not also instantly some truth in MacIntyre – at least that we are afflicted with barbarism, and are scarcely aware of our predicament, indeed we even plunge further into it with vigour and zeal?

Many western theologians have shown a great interest in MacIntyre and share Havel's concern about the triumph of the technological mentality. A good example is Rowan Williams. Writing on SDI (colloquially known as Star Wars), he detects a kidnapping of moral politics by technology. He identifies the issue:

whether the conflicts that arise between groups of people can or cannot be handled by 'human' means; and the characteristic modern temptation is, it seems, to conclude that they can translated into technical terms and made susceptible to technological solutions. In such terms, they are, of course, easier to handle: technology does not, in itself, involve courses of action that require us to move or be moved as persons or groups of persons. . . . Technology refines our *control* of our environment . . . and thus is a perennially attractive alternative to the uncertainty, the vulnerability of human agreement – a long process, involving losses and risks. If all important problems are technical, they are in principle soluble without risk to our sense of ourselves, our moral self-perception. The identification of the technical 'can' with the moral 'should' – or the blotting out by the former of questions about the latter – is endemic in our culture. We are largely incapable of asking what human purpose technology in such areas serves, because we largely lack a shared language about what is significantly human.³¹

What of Hayek? Does he offer any remedy for these ills? Hayek has, of course, played a distinguished role in exposing the deficiencies of state socialism. He vigorously affirms the value of the individual. And yet, if we follow Crowley, there are grave doubts whether his view of the self is remotely adequate. And if Havel's diagnosis is correct, it is very hard to see how Hayek can offer a real antidote to the malaise.

Hayek's search for objective, certain knowledge leads him to single out the spontaneous order (especially of the market) and an abstract procedural notion of justice. In the public arena there is no higher goal than the survival of society, and no other means than the acceptance of this order and its procedural implications and a calculating utilitarianism. This is the Great Society, inherently superior to the primitive society of common goals. There are no common goals: they are privately chosen. True, Hayek can claim that to leave people entirely free to construct their own values in no way means that their values will inevitably be consumerist. They might be altruistic. But no distinction is made between ideals and wants. Choice of values is arbitrary, and choice between alternatives involves innocuous calculation of maximum satisfaction at minimum cost, with no deep engagement of the self and no fundamental costs to the person. It would only be if one shared Havel's deep conviction about the claim of public truth that it could remotely make sense to defy the authorities. Hayekian man would have every incentive to fall victim to the authorities, who will be adept at dealing with a creature whose pursuit is the maximisation of his satisfactions, albeit enlightened. As Havel plaintively asks, 'Is it not true that the far-reaching adaptability to living a lie [has] some connection with the general

unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity?'³²

The inadequacy of Hayek's philosophy becomes even more apparent when we consider more deeply some of Havel's constructive understanding of the self. Havel writes:

Our 'I' primordially attests to [the] 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 . . . 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, honour, treason, friendship, infidelity, courage or empathy have a wholly tangible content, relating to actual persons and important for actual life.³³

Crowley, writing more philosophically, in effect endorses Havel's insights. 'There is no "thin" self at the core. We cannot talk intelligibly about people without attributes, or people who merely possess their attributes but are not constituted by them.' What we need is an account of the self which is thickly constituted. Moreover, 'the self is permeable, it can be and is shaped and changed by its experiences and its environment.' Individual experience is not merely contingent and arbitrary but is absolutely necessary to any sense of self whatsoever; and participant reactive attitudes are a necessary part of a person's repertoire of relationships. 'A person must be capable of having relationships which engage him on a deep level, relationships which involve mutual consideration, reciprocal openness and shared emotion, transcending objective relations; relationships, in short, which are "intersubjective".'³⁴

Havel goes beyond Crowley in hinting at a total metaphysical context of human personality. The smokestack is a symbol of an age that seeks to transcend the boundaries of the natural world and its norms. 'It is a symbol of an epoch which denies the binding importance of personal experience – including the experience of mystery and of the absolute – and displaces the personally experienced absolute as the measure of the world.' Man arrogantly plays God. Havel follows Václav Bělohradský's theory that the origin of the modern state and modern political power may be sought 'in a moment when human reason begins to "free" itself from the human being as such, from his personal experience, personal conscience and personal responsibility, and so also from that to which, within the framework of the natural world, all responsibility is uniquely related, his absolute horizon.'³⁵

Theologians in the West would generally agree with Havel's call for the recognition of an absolute horizon for the sake of our humanity. In Britain in the 1980s the most distinguished official document of the Church of England was *The Church and the Bomb* (1982), which was, in both its analysis and its proposals, a pretty radical document, at least for a church addicted to *mediocritas*. Much discussion at the official level was targeted at containing and if possible eliminating this radicality. But some of *The Church and the Bomb's* finest ideas have resisted this treatment, and in 1989 a very fine collection of essays appeared: *The Nuclear Weapons Debate: Theological and Ethical Issues*, edited by Richard Bauckham and John Elford. The contributors were determined to rescue the debate from its current poverty and dig down into the fundamental assumptions of western civilisation. Bauckham himself points out that the secularisation of the western sense of history through the Enlightenment eliminated the notion of a sovereign, transcendent God. 'In the place of

the promise and providence of God as the ground for hope and the creative power of the future the new philosophies of history substituted both human action and an immanent teleology within history.' This combination is found both in the western liberal idea of progress and in Marxism. It created a tension between the determinism of an inevitable historical process and voluntarism of human decision and action to create the future. Today the wars of the twentieth century have weakened faith in the immanent processes of history. But this has only intensified belief in the human power to control and create the future. 'This is part and parcel of the culture of domination which stems from the Enlightenment.' Bauckham believes we have to renounce our dreams of omnipotence. We must have a realistic awareness of human finitude, and accept that human excellence lies in working with and not against the limits of human existence.³⁶

Havel's phrases 'natural world' and 'order of being' (and Bauckham's concept of limits) plainly imply some version of natural law. For Havel there is a structure of the world – the rhythms of days and seasons, the distinction of good and evil, beauty and ugliness in human relations – which is accessible to us. '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.' He goes on:

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, just for 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.

Here is presupposed an absolute 'which we can only quietly respect'.³⁷

Natural law has been prematurely declared dead on innumerable occasions, but it springs up as perennially as the grass. Havel's version appears to have much in common with recent explorations of the meaning of nature law by theologians, especially in the context of the post-Vatican II Catholic Church. In the past it has often been presented as a rigid objective structure of absolute norms to which human beings give rational assent. Today it is interpreted much more flexibly. The conviction remains that values are given by an absolute God, and that there are demands upon conscience. But these demands and values are known in and through the concrete business of living, through intersubjective relationships. This helps in turn to underline the interior or subjective dimension of natural law. Josef Fuchs, for example, has located absoluteness (at the human level) in the need to find the right response to concrete human reality by attending to the given constants of human nature (which include accountability and interpersonality) and the circumstances. And Richard McCormick has described natural law as 'the imperative implied in our very being', linking it to the essential interiority of the law of love in the New Testament, and urging a creative and adventurous pursuit of the Christian moral life.³⁸

This subjective dimension surfaces in Havel when he recalls the experience of living under a post-totalitarian regime. Even if a citizen takes orders in silence from an incompetent superior, and performs ritual acts that he privately finds ridiculous, even if he denies himself in public (like the greengrocer exhibiting the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite' in his shop window), 'it still does not mean that he has entirely lost the use of one of the basic human senses, namely, the sense of *humiliation*. . . Even if they never speak of it, people have a very acute appreciation of the price they have

paid for outward peace and quiet: the permanent *humiliation of their human dignity*.' All the fear one has endured, dissimulation one has been forced into, and cowardice one has displayed 'settles and accumulates somewhere on the bottom of our social consciousness, quietly fermenting'.³⁹

This observation has also frequently been made in western theology. Reinhold Niebuhr, no lover of traditional natural law, nevertheless observed that

no man, however deeply involved in sin, is able to regard the misery of sin as normal. Some memory of a previous condition of blessedness seems to linger in his soul; some echo of the law which he has violated seems to resound in his conscience. Every effort to give the habits of sin the appearance of normality betrays something of the frenzy of an uneasy conscience.⁴⁰

Havel most interestingly articulates this hidden law in a *corporate* sense. Individuals can be alienated from themselves only because there is *something* in them to alienate, namely their authentic existence. Living a lie can only make sense against a background of the human predisposition to truth. 'Under the orderly surface of the life of lies, therefore, slumbers the hidden sphere of life in its real aims, of its hidden openness to truth.' The individual who lives within the truth has an invisible but omnipresent ally in this hidden sphere. 'It is from this sphere that life lived openly in the truth grows; it is to this sphere that it speaks, and in it that it finds understanding. This is where the potential for communication exists.' Truth unites people, and so there is built up a fifth column of social consciousness where human beings' repressed longing for dignity and fundamental rights develops a power that challenges the post-totalitarian regime.⁴¹

It is very clear then that for Havel there can be no bifurcation of existence into a public and a private realm. Truth flourishes in a dialectic climate of genuine knowledge. 'The main route by which society is inwardly enlarged, enriched and cultivated is that of coming to know itself in ever greater depth, range and subtlety.' And it is mainly culture that enables a society to enlarge its liberty and to discover truth – which is of course anathema to the authorities of the post-totalitarian regime.⁴²

Havel puts this slightly differently when he draws attention to the loss of the sense of time and history under post-totalitarian regimes. A deadly order has been imposed, and the deadening of the sense of the time sequence in society inevitably kills it in private life as well. 'No longer backed by social history or the history of the individual position within it, private life declines to a prehistoric level where time derives its only rhythm from such events as birth, marriage and death.'⁴³

Again I believe that the insights of Crowley are very much in tune with Havel. 'It is the thickly constituted self, the self with goals, attributes and attachments, with history and experiences, that gives the context which makes reason possible.' And the self can reason in depth. 'Reason is about striving to construct a self-consistent set of values and goals from amongst the chaotic universe of possibilities such a thickly constituted self presents.' Reason allows us to sift through our experiences, our knowledge of the world and our own reactions to it; to integrate that self-knowledge, to make it our own and to construct from it an articulated understanding of ourselves, of our deepest values. It is, therefore, 'an active faculty, which struggles to reconcile our deep moral sense and our conscious understandings of ourself and, in the process, transforms them both.' It enables us to adopt an open stance *vis-à-vis* our deep moral sense. We can distance ourselves from our professed values and reflect on who we truly are in our deepest sense of what is important; we can discover who we already

are, and work to live our life in conformity with our best understanding of who we wish to be.⁴⁴

Havel and other East-European dissidents seem to me to have been living embodiments of this process of struggle for integrity and identity. Havel speaks of 'the everyday, thankless and never ending struggle of human beings to live more freely, truthfully and in quiet dignity'. Again, it is a corporate struggle. Small communities of dissidents (communities rather than organisations) are 'bound together by thousands of shared tribulations, giving rise to humanly meaningful political relationships, and motivated mainly by a common belief in the profound significance of what they are doing'.⁴⁵

This struggle, says Havel, is an all-or-nothing gamble, a risk, without any certainty of tangible results. 'It is difficult to imagine a reasonable person embarking on such a course merely because he or she reckons that sacrifice today will bring rewards tomorrow.' But, as Jan Patočka wrote shortly before his death, there are some things worth suffering for. And 'the purity of this struggle is the best guarantee of optimum results when it comes to actual interaction with the post-totalitarian structures.'⁴⁶

Human identity must not be sacrificed to politics. And in the context of Czechoslovakia the only way to conduct real politics is to take your stand on the solid ground of your identity.⁴⁷ Havel favours 'anti-political politics', politics not as the technology of power and manipulation, but as one of the ways of seeking and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting and serving them.⁴⁸ The decisive sphere of this struggle is the pre-political, in the hidden sphere, where people live with the truth. People living here have no access to real power, nor do they aspire to it. They may be poets, painters, musicians or simply ordinary citizens who are able to maintain their human dignity. Herein lies 'the power of the powerless'.⁴⁹

It is striking how Havel stresses the non-exclusive openness of such groups. Charter 77 was, for example, open to all.⁵⁰ They cannot be understood as a retreat into a ghetto, addressing themselves only to the welfare of their members, and indifferent to the rest. Living in the truth must entail concern for others. The fundamental reason is in the intersubjective character of our selves.

Historical experience teaches us that any genuinely meaningful point of departure in an individual's life usually has an element of universality about it. . . . It must be potentially accessible to everyone; it must foreshadow a general solution, and thus it is not just the expression of an introverted, self-contained responsibility that individuals have to and for themselves alone, but responsibility with and for the world.⁵¹

It is no surprise therefore that Havel speaks of an arrest of another as being an attack on me as well, of our shared destiny, and that he pins his hopes for a better future on the emergence of 'an international community of the shaken'.⁵²

Finally, I wish to draw attention to broad convictions that I believe are fundamental to Christianity and that have a deep compatibility with the insights of Havel and Crowley and underpin my earlier observations.

First, it has become increasingly clear to Christian theologians of all persuasions that Christianity is not fundamentally a set of abstractions but a distinctive way of life. It is lived out in the here and now, in flesh and blood relationships. Our relationship with God is inseparable from our relationship with other concrete human beings and indeed with the wider physical creation. The most basic warrant for this view is the nature of God and the way he relates to the world. The created order is one of radical contingency. It is a time-space order that is the basis for history. The Bible

presents us with a God who providentially sustains the whole created order and guides the course of all human history. In the Old Testament, God liberates the particular people Israel, and enters into a covenant with them that gives a basic meaning and purpose to their existence. They are invited to rejoice in this gracious gift of liberty and covenant and mark it by celebration. This gift is matched by a task: Israel is to live in fidelity and obedience to this gracious God. It is required to be and to become a certain kind of people. As the history of Israel unfolds, we find this God passionately engaged with his people. Their infidelity – their evasion of responsibility and retreat from history to prehistory – stirs up his wrath, their repentance his mercy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the prophets. They wrestle passionately with the failings of Israel and with their own alienation. They struggle to recover and deepen Israel's self-understanding, and they come to realise that the covenant is sustained not by human obedience but only by the God who will not let them go. This alone is the basis for hope for the future.

In the New Testament we immediately encounter the supreme engagement of God with his world: the Word becomes flesh. Nothing is more striking in the Gospels than the passionate intensity of Jesus Christ's engagement with his people and especially with the individual lost members. If Jesus Christ is the paradigm of the Christian life, then surely we have to do with the thickly constituted self. It is a self that goes out to enter into deeply subjective relationships. It is also a highly permeable self, so much so that his renunciation and crucifixion provokes the mysterious cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' And surely the Passion is an all-or-nothing gamble on which no reasonable person would embark. It is anti-political politics, an affirmation of identity and integrity in the face of the corrupt collusion of politics and religion. And from that state of powerlessness has come a group that is called to be similarly faithful, non-exclusive and open, with a responsibility towards the whole world.

If what I have said is anywhere near the heart of the matter, then it is no surprise that the principal genre of the Bible is story. The narrative character of the Bible and its implications have been of considerable recent interest to theologians. Let me illustrate.

From among the Lutherans I would mention the work of Professor Oswald Bayer of Tübingen. Bayer is an expert in the theology of Johann Georg Hamann, who criticised Kant mercilessly for his propensity to abstractions. Hamann insisted on the passionate flesh-and-blood intensity of the relationship of God and the believer, and Bayer has in his own theological reflection emphasised the utter concreteness of the Word. He deplores the tyranny of Kant over German theology, the inveterate tendency to winnow out the particular and contingent in favour of the universal and non-contingent.⁵³

In a different direction Stanley Hauerwas, an American Methodist, has seen the Christian Church as composed of communities of character who are faithfully to live by the story of God's gracious dealings with his world. (This has some affinity with the Roman Catholic Johann-Baptist Metz's concept of the Church living by the dangerous memory of this story.) Hauerwas has quite rightly brought back into focus, after a period of comparative neglect, the importance of the development of character in the Christian life. Is it not our prime responsibility to put ourselves under the Gospel narrative, to feel its rhythm, and to attempt to respond by living our lives in fidelity to it? His theological position seems to be to very close to Crowley's philosophical articulation of the point that we stand in a moral relationship to our action, such that who we are, including our relational self, is of crucial significance.⁵⁴

In pointing to the Church as a community of character Hauerwas is calling into question a typical approach to Christian social ethics. Christians have rightly insisted that there is no warrant for a bifurcation of the public and private arenas. But they have often become enmeshed in the questions: How can we effectively ameliorate the condition of society? What are the resources of the Christian faith for this task, and how are they to be deployed? A standard response is to infer somewhat abstract principles, such as freedom and sociality, from the Christian faith, to make a critique of existing society on that basis, and to suggest broad directions in which society might move so as to become more evidently a Christian society. This exercise is usually accompanied by appeals to the government to implement certain policies.⁵⁵ I do not think this approach is wrong. It is a valid activity – more viable in some western societies where governments have some residual respect for Christianity – but it is only one valid activity, and perhaps not the most fundamental. It can deflect attention from the question of who Christians are and what quality of life we are called to exhibit.

Hauerwas has been criticised for so presenting the communities of character that they appear sectarian. Their fidelity to the stern demands of the Gospel might cut them off from any impact on the wider life of society, except in a very indirect sense. The critics are, I believe, saying something first and foremost about themselves – that they think of the Christian Church as being basically supportive of society and its values rather than at odds with them. The strength of Hauerwas is that he recognises that the Christian Church is distinctive, in the sense that it has its own life to live, and in that its life will be visibly dissident from the society in which it is set. It may well be that Havel offers an important insight which can help to resolve the gap between Hauerwas and his critics. The source of hope for our world lies not primarily in ameliorating the social order (the crisis impels dissent more than support), nor in discipleship groups of Christians living lives separated from society. It lies rather in Christians living thoroughly and openly within their culture, nurturing the hidden sphere of the corporate pre-political life, in cooperation with as many human beings as possible, whatever their ultimate persuasion, and deploying the insights and practices of the most deeply human and Christian kind they can reach.

Notes and References

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth, London, 2nd edn, 1985).

² Václav Havel, *Living in Truth* (Faber and Faber, London, 2nd edn, 1987). Twenty-two essays published on the occasion of the award of the Erasmus Prize to Havel, edited by Jan Vladislav. The six essays by Havel himself are: 'Letter to Dr Gustav Husák', 'The power of the powerless', 'Six asides about culture', 'Politics and conscience', 'Thriller' and 'An anatomy of reticence'.

³ There is a very useful collection of readings in this debate edited by Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and Its Critics* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1984).

⁴ Hayek's works are numerous and he lived to over 90. See especially: *The Road to Serfdom* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1944); *The Constitution of Liberty* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960); *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (3 volumes, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1973–9). The account draws on: Brian Lee Crowley, *The Self, the Individual and the Community* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987); Eamonn Butler, *Hayek* (Temple Smith, London, 1983); Norman P. Barry, *The New Right* (Croom Helm, London, 1987).

⁵ Quoted in Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 183.

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 175–7.

- ⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 176–7.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 184.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 183.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 178, 180, 185.
- ¹² *ibid.*, p. 198. The quotation from Berlin is in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969), p. 136.
- ¹³ Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 201–2.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 202–3.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 204–5. The quotation is from Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982), p. 179. Crowley draws extensively on Sandel.
- ¹⁷ Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 206–7.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 208–10.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 186–8.
- ²⁰ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*
- ²¹ Thomas A. Spragens Jr, *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1981), p. 15; quoted by Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
- ²² Crowley, *ibid.*, pp. 190–1.
- ²³ Havel, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 54.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 116, 114, 145, 94–5, 138–9.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 11–14.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 62.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 138, 142, 144.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 145.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 89, 116.
- ³¹ Rowan Williams, 'The ethics of SDI', in R. J. Bauckham and R. J. Elford (eds), *The Nuclear Weapons Debate: Theological and Ethical Issues* (SCM Press, London, 1989), pp. 166–7.
- ³² Havel, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- ³³ *ibid.*, p. 137.
- ³⁴ Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 211–12.
- ³⁵ Havel, *op. cit.*, pp. 138, 143.
- ³⁶ *The Church and the Bomb* (CIO Publishing, London, 1982); Richard J. Bauckham, 'Facing the future: the challenge to secular and theological presuppositions', *The Nuclear Weapons Debate*, pp. 32–9.
- ³⁷ Havel, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- ³⁸ J. Fuchs, SJ, *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1983), chapter 7; R. A. McCormick, in G. Outka and P. Ramsey (eds), *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* (SCM Press, London, 1969), pp. 234–43.
- ³⁹ Havel, *op. cit.*, pp. 31, 41.
- ⁴⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Nisbet, London, 1941), vol. I, p. 281.
- ⁴¹ Havel, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–8; cf. pp. 66, 69.
- ⁴² *ibid.*, p. 16.
- ⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 26.
- ⁴⁴ Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 212–15.
- ⁴⁵ Havel, *op. cit.*, pp. 113, 120.
- ⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 62, 66, 113.
- ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 61.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 155.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 59–60, 65.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 64–5.
- ⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 149, 157.

⁵³ Oswald Bayer, *Zugesagte Freiheit* (Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh, 1980); *Umstrittene Freiheit* (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1981); *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch* (Piper, Munich, 1988).

⁵⁴ See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (University Press, Notre Dame, 1983); *A Community of Character* (University Press, Notre Dame, 1981); J.-B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (Burns and Oates, London, 1980).

⁵⁵ This approach was pursued, for example, by William Temple. See his *Christianity and Social Order* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1942).