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*Published in:*  
Ethics & Bioethics (In Central Europe)

*DOI:*  
[10.1515/ebce-2016-0012](https://doi.org/10.1515/ebce-2016-0012)

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*Recommended citation(APA):*  
Brennan, D. (2016). Vaclav Havel's Levinas: Timely remarks on humanism. *Ethics & Bioethics (In Central Europe)*, 6(3-4), 119-133. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ebce-2016-0012>

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## Vaclav Havel's Levinas: Timely remarks on humanism

Daniel Brennan

### Abstract

The paper explores Václav Havel's encounter with Emmanuel Levinas' essay 'Without Identity', which Havel read while in prison. The discussion of this encounter will demonstrate the importance of this encounter for solidifying the humanist elements of Havel's thought, whilst also demonstrating the pre-existing humanism in Havel, evidence itself of his large debt to Czechoslovak humanist thought. What emerges is a demonstration of the richness and timeliness of Havel's writing on responsibility. The paper makes a case for rejecting popular Heideggerian interpretations of Havel's oeuvre. Havel's deep affinity for Levinas' thinking demonstrates that Havel's humanism, informed as it is from the Czech tradition as well as through his encounter with Levinas, is at odds with Heidegger's essential anti-humanism.

**Keywords:** Havel, Masaryk, Patočka, Čapek, Levinas, Heidegger, humanism, responsibility

Václav Havel first encountered the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas while in prison.<sup>1</sup> He read a translation of the essay 'Without Identity,' made for him by his brother, Ivan.<sup>2</sup> Havel was deeply affected by this encounter and the most philosophically rich of his letters to his wife Olga from prison are overtly meditations on this encounter (Havel, 1989). Levinas' essay is a passionate defence of humanism. Levinas describes humanism as an "untimely consideration," and by this untimely he means not that it is old or out of date; rather, it is lamentably, and to our detriment, unfashionable to be thinking positively about humanism (Levinas, 2006, p. 59).

Levinas is writing of the French intellectual scene immediately after the May 1968 protests in Paris. Levinas is scathing of intellectual trends which, in Levinas' view, were hindering the development of responsible humanist thought. For Levinas, these fashionable moments in thought are a part of a debased marketplace of ideas where the most charismatic voices are given court regardless of the implications of the ideas. The Parisian café is described by Levinas as beholden to "the tyranny of the latest craze" (Levinas, 2006, p. 59). In the essay's closing remarks Levinas sets out the clash between the fashionable café ideas, and his own humanism. "The idea of a closed subjectivity that can't close itself in – unto substitution – responsible for all others and, consequently, the idea of the defence of man understood as a defence of the man other than me, presides over what is called in our day the critique of humanism" (Levinas, 2006, pp. 68–69).

Levinas is adamant that his humanism undercuts the detrimental, immoral and unfortunately fashionable anti-humanism of the time. For Havel though, and similarly for the majority of intellectuals of Central Europe, humanism is never under question. The pitched battle between anti-humanism and humanism that Levinas waged in Paris, was unnecessary in Prague. The youth in late socialist Czechoslovakia saw humanism as a counter to the terror they experienced at the hands of totalitarian politics. Havel, as a representative of the Czechoslovak dissident movement, is also representative of the humanist potential for ethical living hoped for by Levinas in the final stages of his essay.

Thus it is worthwhile considering the encounter between the Levinas and Havel. What will emerge through this encounter is a rich engagement between Havel's most philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Havel was charged with the crime of subversion of the republic and remained in prison from 1979 until 1983.

<sup>2</sup> The essay is published in the collection *Humanism of the Other* (Levinas, 2006, pp. 58–69).

writing, and Levinas' most enthusiastic endeavour. In the bigger picture, it is worthwhile exploring, through Havel, the kind of humanism that flourished amongst Czechoslovak dissidents, as that humanism avoids much of what is most problematic in the attacks on humanism, and the implications of such thinking, which are more prominent in philosophy further west. Where many French social thinkers saw humanism as a pathway to terror, under the real and present terror of late socialism, humanism, for Czechoslovak dissidents, was an idea that generated hope in dark times.

Levinas' essay was written in the wake of 1968's social upheavals in Paris. The anti-humanism that pervaded 'popular' theory of the time was usually couched in arguments for socialism. Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir and others fused the anti-humanism of Heidegger's position with their vision of a proletariat revolution (Judt, 1992, pp. 77–80). For example, for Merleau-Ponty, meaning was to be found in history, and as a consequence, if we are to be humanists, we must also be Marxists (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 118). As Tony Judt describes it, French intellectuals were deeply attracted to violence and were similarly disinterested in morality as a category of public behaviour (Judt, 1992, p. 7). This is the problematic situation Levinas was responding to.

This trend has, to an extent continued with many popular social thinkers from western European philosophy searching for radical alternatives to the current neoliberal world order (Sharpe, 2015, p.2). Many of these attempts are brim full of irresponsible calls for Messianism, martyrdom and theological revolution. Such social theory directly calls to mind the debased market of fashionable café ideas that Levinas derides (Levinas, 2006, p. 58). It is as if the failure of socialism to supply a morally sufficient alternative to capitalism has led to a situation where radical politics is the only possible address to the neoliberal state. Built into much of this theory is a wholesale rejection of the oft maligned concept of humanism. Anti-humanism abounds as theorists note the manifold ways that hegemony and ideology form identity (Mouffe, 2004, p. 22). For these anti-humanists, *humanitas* is a long dead concept which was responsible for our horribly mistaken attempts to master the planet. Matthew Sharpe diagnoses the outlook of these anti-humanists: “[The enlightenment's] baleful cultural hegemony has issued in a technological iron cage, gilded with a vacuously aestheticised public culture. The whole dispensation seemingly allows for no exit, short of the arrival of a radical Otherness or difference sufficiently recalcitrant to all knowable order to be able to offer... redemption” (Sharpe, 2015, pp. 2–3). The bulk of such theory originates in an encounter with mid-century French and German philosophy. Foucault and post-structuralism still dominates much contemporary thinking as the human has been argued to be ideologically created, even, through the idea of bio-power, down to the tiniest social behaviour. Heidegger through his poor reading of the history of philosophy has also demonstrated the inherent inability of the expression of Being in our epoch to ask the important questions which might arrest a slide towards nihilism. We are thus, from Heidegger's view, in a sense doomed to our predicament. “Only a god can still save us” has come to mean that an entire epochal shift is required if our current nihilism is to be deflected (Heidegger 1966).

It is thus a shame that especially in the Anglophone world, that intellectual debates regarding what has come to be called Continental philosophy, just slightly further to the East have largely been ignored. While France was, for the most part, turning its back on humanism after the earlier blind faith in socialism had revealed that reason was deficient for producing utopia, Central and Eastern European thinkers were revitalizing their understanding of humanism. The turn towards Heidegger and anti-humanism can be, not without controversy, dated to the assumed victory of Heidegger over Ernst Cassirer in a debate on the meaning of the human. As the Cassirer–Heidegger debate in Davos was widely seen as a win for the charismatic Heidegger, the positive reception of Heidegger flowed back into France.

Although Heidegger greatly influenced thinkers further East of Davos, it was not anti-humanist thought which was reproduced. In Czechoslovakia, Jan Patočka, who, like Levinas, had studied under Heidegger, worked at first at bringing Husserl into Prague after his expulsion and then, after Husserl's death, at preserving his archives (Kohak, 1989, pp. 9–10). Husserl had been led to philosophy in Vienna through the advice of his good friend Tomáš G. Masaryk. Masaryk, in central Europe, is a towering figure in intellectual and public history and, arguably, his most important contribution to thought is his unwavering philosophical faith in the virtues of humanist thought and the application of this thought for political life. Thus Czechoslovakia, unlike France, did not have a crisis of humanism. Stretching back to the renaissance, the thinking of Jan Amos Komenský begins a long pedigree of humanist writing.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas in France, Levinas exasperatingly describes humanism as an idea “out of time”, in Prague, despite the risk to attendees, in underground and illegal meetings and samizdat publications, thinking citizens illuminated their dark times with humanist thought (Hajek, 1992, p. 5). Thus it is worth considering the timeliness of their out of times humanism. In this paper I will start such a project with a consideration of Václav Havel, a student of Jan Patočka's and admirer of Masaryk's thought and example.

Havel, interestingly, read Levinas while in prison from 1979–1983. His brother, Ivan, had made for him a translation of the essay, ‘Without Identity’ which is now published in the book, *Humanism of the Other*. This is his only stated encounter with Levinas' thought (Kriseová, 1993, p. 183). Despite the strong mark that Levinas' thought left on Havel it is worth noting that Havel writes that throughout the reading he “was dogged by the feeling that [he'd] read it all somewhere before” (Havel, 1989, p. 314). Havel did not read Levinas as opening a new way to think about responsibility. Levinas, for Havel, articulates ideas which already are present in Czechoslovak debates.

What follows is also interesting for students of Levinas, as Levinas' biographer, Salomon Malka, is excited to have discovered that Havel had read Levinas, but he does not know which paper Havel actually read. The specific paper is important for understanding how Havel relates to Levinas. Furthermore, it is a common misconception that Havel is deeply indebted to the thinking of Martin Heidegger, especially regarding Heidegger's critique of technology (Sire, 2001, p. 79; Pontusso, 2004, pp. 21–22; Tucker, 2000, p. 140). To the Anglophone world, Havel offers, ‘Heideggerian meditations’ when his writing takes on a philosophical tone. Through detailed discussion of Havel's encounter with Levinas it will be demonstrated that far from being a disciple of Heidegger, Havel at no point offers any analysis that can be said to fit into the anti-humanist philosophy of Heidegger. This is an important point, for although Havel did read Heidegger, unlike the French reception of Heidegger which could be said to be an apologist reception, Havel's engagement goes no further than the borrowing of terminology. In most instances it can be shown that when Havel and Heidegger share a term, they mean different things by that term.

It is hoped that through the exploration of Havel's encounter with Levinas, that will necessarily entail further explorations into Havel's inheritance of the humanist legacy from Masaryk and Patočka, that a robust debate of humanist ideas can again be seen as a valid response to any ‘crisis’ such as neoliberal political domination, or the Syrian refugee crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Amos Komenský (lat. Johann Amos Comenius) was a 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher interested, amongst other things, in the role that education could play in improving society. His idea of *pan-sophia* was a Baconian attempt to organize human knowledge to attempt omniscience. The reverence that Czech thinkers such as Havel, Masaryk and Patočka show to Komenský's thinking reveals the rigorousness of public debate regarding humanism over the centuries.

### Heidegger, the Red Herring

In much of the scholarship treating Havel's intellectual output it is widely accepted that Havel is heavily influenced by the thoughts of Martin Heidegger. Nothing could be further from the truth. In every way imaginable Havel's thinking is at odds with Heidegger's anti-humanist philosophy. For example, Havel's most famous essay, 'The Power of the Powerless' is described by Avazier Tucker as an application of Heidegger's discussion of "Being-in-the-world as Being-with-oneself" (Tucker, 2000, p. 136). Thus Havel's analysis of the actions of a greengrocer, who reflects on his adherence to the rules of the system in which he lives which ask him to hang a placard in his shop window, is, for Tucker, a Heideggerian attempt to show that blind adherence to ritualistic rules is symptomatic of 'fallenness' or 'inauthenticity.' In many ways this example is illustrative of the core of Havel's humanist thinking and it is thus of vital importance to retort that the self-reflection of the greengrocer that reveals his/her complicity in affirming the system, and reveals his/her responsibility for withdrawing that complicity, does not at any level proclaim the epochal nature of thought. That is, the greengrocer, if he/she really were engaged in a Heideggerian act of thinking, would be taking note of his/her participation in historical Being. That is, he/she would see his/her very thought process as manifestly destined. Rather than revealing the potential for political change through an act of resistance, which is how Havel frames the reflection. The Heideggerian greengrocer engages in thought to see how unfree he/she is. What Tucker fails to understand is that for Havel, culture is the result of a creative free act. Havel's analysis does not ever leave culture. The higher horizon which we are all responsible to, that will be explained in the next section, for Havel is not an escape from culture, but a call to direct culture to moral ends. That is, for Havel, being aware of our historicity is the same thing as being aware of how we should direct culture.

Tucker does admit that Havel parts ways with Heidegger on the importance of ethics for authentic life (Tucker, 2000, p. 155). However, it would be better to say that Havel's core project is essentially not compatible with Heidegger's from the outset. This incompatibility can be demonstrated further if we consider Havel's and Heidegger's understanding of the term 'thrownness'. For Heidegger, the human subject is thrown into a situation in which it receives its meaning from historical Being (Heidegger, 2008, p. 192). Thrownness is the receiving of destiny. In the early drafts of *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes Dasein as "taking orders", "carrying out its reckoning and routine", these submissively toned descriptors are what will become the description of thrownness in the final version (Kisiel, 1995, p. 335). The use of the term thrownness, in Havel, is something very different. When Havel writes of thrownness he describes it in a way more familiar to readers of Levinas than Heidegger. "[T]he state of thrownness into responsibility for another exists "before the 'I' itself"" (Havel, 1989, p. 325). Havel continues to write that what the 'I' is thrown into and precedes the 'I'. By this Havel is suggesting that there is a historical context into which a person is thrown. What is significant though is that the meaning of that situation is to be found in the ethical metaphysical relationship to the other, not from historical being itself.

It is more prudent to consider Havel's relationship to Heidegger through the lens of the Heidegger-Cassirer debate mentioned above. This important moment in the recent history of European philosophy sets out a line in the sand between traditional neo-Kantian humanism on the one hand, and Heidegger's anti-humanism on the other. Havel was clearly not present at this event; however, on pure speculation I would suggest, against the Heideggerian interpretations of Havel's *oeuvre* that he would have firmly sided with Cassirer. It is worthwhile making this speculation as Levinas deeply regretted his initial pronouncement of Heidegger's victory. Richard Cohen suggests that this debate, and Levinas' regret of his first impulse to side with Heidegger, is an illuminating way to read the entirety of Levinas' post-

debate publications. Cohen writes, “Levinas’s relation to Cassirer is not simply a matter of psychological interest. It has profound philosophical implications, especially for a proper conception of humanism and its responsibilities” (Cohen, 2006, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii). For Cohen, when Derrida criticizes Levinas’s project in ‘Violence et Metaphysique’ by linking it “by an ingenious dialectical violation to the very ontology he radically opposed,” Derrida misses the specific context of Levinas’ work (Cohen, 2006, p. xxxvii). For Cohen, Levinas’ project must be understood as working within Cassirer’s humanism, against Heidegger. The insight that Cassirer misses, Cohen argues, is the moral primacy of the other. This is not a mystical idea; it is deeply rooted in culture. In the terms, then, of the opposition between Cassirer and Heidegger, Havel, as an advocate of cultural change and responsibility, is more on the side of Cassirer, than Levinas.

### **Havel’s Levinas**

Havel’s reading of ‘Without Identity’ solidifies much in Havel’s thinking. Levinas’ thoughts on the power of youth had a deep impact on Havel, who himself had thought, but not made as explicit, the potential power inherent in youth to reconstitute ethical living through a recovery of responsibility. Hence it is worth considering Levinas’ thoughts on youth and how they were understood by Havel.

For Levinas, youth is a phenomenon and concept that belongs to what he terms the Saying, as opposed to the Said. The Saying and the Said are important concepts for Levinas’ ethics. It is quite difficult to give a full definition of each concept because, as is the case with most of Levinas’ writings, they are employed in a manner which invites meditation rather than tight understanding. This is, of course, the crucial element of Levinas’ project. Levinas rejects the idea of a stable, knowable reality which is accessible to the human subject. Attempts to explicate such a reality, for Levinas, represent the subject’s appropriation of otherness. That is any claim to understanding is also simultaneously a reduction of the other to the subject. Levinas thus attempts to wrestle language away from a discourse of clarity and understanding and instead tries to orientate discourse towards an ethical encounter with otherness. The Saying, thus, is that element of discourse which approaches the other as other. Therefore, the Saying is language stripped bare of presentation, demonstration and knowing (Levinas, 1974, p. 278). The Said entails the rest of language, the descriptive element of language which appropriates otherness. Colin Davis writes that for Levinas, the Saying is a primordial element of language. “Giving priority to the Said entails a failure to recognize another distinctive dimension of language, which Levinas calls Saying: underlying, though not fully represented by, every utterance is a situation, structure or event in which I am exposed to the Other as a speaker or receiver of discourse” (Davis, 1996, p. 75). Ethical living, can thus be said to be prioritizing the Saying – allowing responsibility to reveal itself in exposure to otherness.

In ‘Without Identity’ the Saying is described through the adjective of ‘youth.’ Youth is described as a “rupture of the context” and as “coming from sincerity” where sincerity is the responsibility for others (Levinas, 2006, p. 69). Levinas’ musings on youth were inspired by the events of 1968. Levinas was deeply concerned at the way that the free and unformed spirit of youth was contained and reduced by the attractiveness of social theory, whose language, Levinas writes, was “just as wordy and conformist as the one it was supposed to replace” (Levinas, 2006, p. 69). Youth is the energy to contest the world of the Said.

It is this understanding of youth which appeals to Havel. Havel writes, “I have always felt that the revolt of the young (in its expansive pre-ideological or pre-linguistic phase) was an extraordinarily important phenomenon” (Havel, 1989, p. 312). Havel’s own belief in the power of youth to upset ideological certainties is on vivid display five years prior to his reading of Levinas. In 1977 Havel, as well as many other dissident figures, became involved

in the trial of the band, The Plastic People of the Universe (PPU). It is important to note that Havel was not a fan of their music, even suggesting that they sacrificed listenability to be experimental (Havel, 1990, p. 126). Consequently, his involvement in the trial wasn't as someone who identifies with the band. What Havel appreciates in the musical expression of PPU was in fact their otherness. If I import Levinas' language to Havel's involvement in this trial, I can say that Havel saw the band as giving expression to the Saying. Havel writes "Here was something serious and genuine, an internally free articulation of an existential experience that everyone who had not become completely obtuse must understand" (Havel, 1990, p. 126). For Havel, the compelling force of ideology had made many become obtuse. Havel is lamenting the way that ideological coercion slows down the authentic expression of youth. The Said of the PPU is a series of notes played on instruments; the Saying is their unbridled expression of existential identity – what Havel calls the "pre-linguistic" content of their music.

Pre-linguistic expression which is the source of responsibility for Havel is a refusal to try to restrict meaning to a single consciousness's understanding. In his 1969 play, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, Havel provides an illustrative example of the poverty of descriptive language's attempt to fix meaning to a single consciousness. The play's central character, Huml, is dictating an essay on happiness to his secretary, Blanka. Huml makes grandiose statements full of philosophical vocabulary. He touches on the nature of justice, historical meaning, alienation, amongst other themes. However, he punctuates the dictation with awkward pauses where he asks Blanka to read back the most recent sentence. This is followed either by a request to delete a section, or a comment on the adequacy of the section. These pregnant pauses and re-writes add an element of uncertainty and absurdity to the meaning of the diction.

Huml: ... – and thus attach to various things various values – full stop. Therefore, it would be mistaken to set up a fixed scale of values, valid for all people in all circumstances and at all times – full stop. This does not mean, however, that in all of history there exist no values common to the whole of mankind – full stop. If those values did exist, mankind would not form a unified whole – full stop... At the same time, an individual scale of values is always somehow related to other – more general – scales of values – for instance, to those belonging to a given period – which form a sort of framework, or background, to the individual scales – full stop. Would you mind reading me the last sentence?

Blanka: (reads) 'At the same time, an individual scale of values is always somehow related to other – more general – scales of values – for instance, to those belonging to a given period – which form a sort of framework, or background, to the individual scales – full stop. Would you mind reading me the last sentence?'

Huml: That's pretty good. Let's go on... (Havel, 1993, p. 140).

The absurdity of Blanka reading the entire dictation back, including the request to read the last part back to Huml, I read as a critique of philosophical language. Huml's diction sounds empty. He stands, on the stage, waxing lyrical about horizons of meaning, as if his secretary were an extension of his thoughts. That she does not intuit where the diction ends and the question directed to her begins is a signifier of the inability of the discourse to recognize her otherness – her role is to record all of Huml's speech. To make this point another way, Huml's speech about meaning being layered from a universal meaning to specific historical and cultural meanings is ironic insofar as the speech ignores the specific presence of Blanka's experience. She is for Huml, an extension of his world view. This relationship is later challenged in the play when Huml expresses his desire for Blanka and she rejects his

advances. It is as if Huml assumed that Blanka had the same mindset as himself and he does not take her rejection very well.

James Pontusso has located in the play a consideration of Heideggerian themes (Pontusso, 2004, p. 96). I suggest they might be found in the above quoted section. Huml considers the possibility of human meaning being a product of historical destiny. This is clearly a Heideggerian notion; however, that consideration is punctuated by Huml's failed attempts to seduce Blanka. Blanka reminds Huml of her otherness by exerting her autonomy to reject his advances. The picture painted is of the emptiness of Huml's claim to know something about human happiness Huml's is clearly a frustrated man. The result is an ironic consideration of Heidegger that could be considered analogous to Levinas' critique of philosophical language. Huml's diction aims at totality through the expression that 'happiness = x' yet the remainder that is unthought in the dictation – (Blanka's disinterest, his mistaken estimation of her desire...) – shows that the attempt at totalizing meaning is unable to capture the infinity of reality. In other words, Huml's dictation is an example of the Said having priority over Saying. His encounter with Blanka is not open to her otherness. To add to this, Huml is old, and comments on the youthfulness of Blanka. His blinkered vision of the situation might be considered a comment on the 'obtuseness' of age.

Levinas' biographer was surprised by Havel's insight, upon reading 'Without Identity' that Levinas had clearly been in prison (Malka, 2006, p. 81). We need not be so surprised by Havel's recognition of Levinas' previous incarceration as what acts as a signpost to this for Havel is Levinas' writing on the vulnerability of consciousness. Being open to the other is described by Levinas as being vulnerable (Levinas, 2006, p. 64). Davis describes Levinas' philosophical endeavour as an attempt to make philosophy susceptible to what it has always suppressed (Davis, 1996, p. 33). In 'Without Identity', Levinas writes of his sense of his own vulnerability. This is vastly different to social theory he criticizes which posits the human as being formed by forces outside of itself (and thus being vulnerable to those forces) (Levinas, 2006, p. 62). Vulnerability, which is akin to openness, is, for Levinas, the assumption for the responsibility of the other without having that responsibility reciprocated. It is passive acceptance of the other, as other, despite the wound to the ego that such passivity would entail (the wounding is a result of resisting the urge to understand and appropriate otherness).

"No longer the essence of being that opens to show itself, not consciousness that opens to the presence of the essence open and confided in it. Opening is the stripping of vulnerability of a skin offered in wound and outrage beyond all that can show itself, beyond all that of essence of being can expose itself to understanding and celebration" (Levinas, 2006, p. 68). Levinas continues to describe vulnerability as the aptitude for being slapped. Levinas means that the other is a constant reminder of the limits of one's freedom. I think it fair to suggest that Blanka's rebuke of Huml's advances, she even pushes him to the floor can be seen as a useful illustration of Levinas' understanding of vulnerability. The irony is that Huml does not reflect on the rebuke, refusing to see that she is not interested, and later claiming that his problem was the timing of his advance.

Vulnerability is a key theme of Havel's Levinasian reflections in *Letters to Olga*. In reflecting on a strange moment he experienced while watching television, Havel describes the importance of Levinas for solidifying his thinking on responsibility and vulnerability. "Several days ago, during the weather report... something went wrong in the studio and the sound cut out, though the picture continued as usual (there was neither the announcement 'Do not adjust your sets' nor landscape photographs, as there usually is in such cases). The employee of the Meteorological Institute who was explaining the forecast quickly grasped what had happened, but because she was not a professional announcer, she did not know what to do. At this point a strange thing happened: the mantle of routine fell away and before us



there suddenly stood a confused, unhappy and terribly embarrassed woman: she stopped talking, looking in desperation at us, then somewhere off to the side, but there was no help from that direction. She could scarcely hold back her tears. Exposed to the view of millions, yet desperately alone, thrown into an unfamiliar, unexpected and unresolvable situation, incapable of conveying through mime that she was above it all... she stood there in all the primordial nakedness of human helplessness” (Havel, 1989, p. 322). In this anecdote Havel claims to have found a metaphor for the primal situation of humanity. Havel writes that he also suffered because he had no way to help her – he was reminded of his own helplessness, as well as his responsibility. For Havel the anecdote highlights what was of most value from his reading of Levinas – that is the idea that our responsibility precedes our freedom.

In the example of the weather woman, the comfortable meanings of the Said are stripped away. Havel’s unformed and unexpressed anguish at his inability to help, the woman’s gestured appeal through the camera for assistance, the revelation of a primordial state of undetermined vulnerability, these are reminders of the infinity of Saying. Havel admits that on reflection, the weather woman’s suffering, in comparison to his own, is probably insignificant. She is a television presenter who would receive the benefits that come with that position, while he is in prison with an unknown release date. Yet before his thoughts solidify into a judgment on the situation Havel is clear that he still feels a primordial responsibility. That is to say, a detailed description of the situation comes after responsibility – Havel feels responsible before he feels that she is better off than he is. For Havel, feelings of compassion, love and a spontaneous desire to help others is prior to our own “speculative” concerns for our own welfare. Such a view is clearly a rejection of the idea that the Husserlian ego illuminates the given through intentional thought and far more akin to Levinas’ assertion that the proper role of philosophy is to go beyond the given to a prior state of ethical responsibility to others before they show themselves to consciousness.

All of this is not to suggest that Havel and Levinas are a neat fit. There is much that Havel would not agree with in Levinas’ philosophy, and which he could have made explicit had he meditated on his differences between his position and that presented in ‘Without Identity.’ For example, in his Levinasian meditations, Havel writes that he agrees with Levinas’ idea that the I, in its thrownness, is in a constant state of vulnerability, showing itself “helplessly and limitlessly” (Havel, 1989, p. 327). The ‘I’, vulnerable before the other and aware of its separateness from the other, must then become aware of its freedom (Havel, 1989, p. 327). For Havel, our freedom consists in the realization of the limits of our agency; in other words, we are free to realize what we can and cannot do. Through the realization of what we can do we become aware of our responsibility. Thus, for Havel, through the initial understanding of the primal orientation to ethical relationships between beings, thought shines light on what our responsibility to others is. That is, and this is crucial, for Havel, once we are aware of the necessary difference between beings, and the inherent limitations on action in any given moment, we are thus able to discern what the best way to act out our responsibility towards others is. Havel’s thought can thus be understood as attempting to derive political solutions to problems of responsibility. In this Havel is close to Cassirer’s point that once responsibility is made known it is possible to direct human culture towards rectifying issues of injustice. The same cannot be said for Levinas, for whom culture is less important than moral transcendence. Havel cannot go with Levinas all the way in this radical project.

Havel writes that true responsibility doesn’t enter the mind until the mind establishes itself as an ‘I’ (Havel, 1989, p. 330). The establishing is an act of naming responsibility and bringing it from a timeless and limitless longing into a world confined by space and time. In this Havel betrays his debt to Czechoslovak humanism as an understanding of responsibility

as a simultaneous awareness of autonomy and the limits to that autonomy are found in the influential humanist thinking of T. G. Masaryk.

### **Havel's Czechoslovak Humanism**

The relative humanist thinking of T. G. Masaryk and Karel Čapek had a formative effect on Havel's thinking. Paul Wilson, in his introduction to *Letters to Olga*, writes that Havel's letters fit into a long line of Czech discourse between Czechs and Slovaks on the meaning of their nation. "This conversation... has a long history stretching back to the beginning of the modern Czech nation in the nineteenth century, when the language and culture were revived and re-created by several generations of patriotic artists, writers, composers, journalists, politicians and intellectuals who based their work on foundations laid by generations of ordinary people who had preserved and enriched the language orally" (Wilson in Havel, 1989, p. 11). Havel's *oeuvre* can easily be said to fit into a larger Czechoslovak conversation about morality and culture. A small comparison of Havel's work with that of the towering figure of Czech literature, Karel Čapek, will reveal Havel's awareness of the canon (Čapek, 2010). Čapek together with Masaryk are two of the most prominent figures in public debate from the beginning of the Czech nation. Both offer a succinct humanism centred on furnishing public life with a moral heart; furthermore, both are concerned with utilizing culture to establish the moral foundations of the political. Hence, it is prudent here to show briefly Havel's debt to these two thinkers as they will demonstrate where Havel and Levinas part ways. Havel will be shown to have more in common with Cassirer than either Levinas or Heidegger.

In Čapek's posthumously published letters to his wife, *Listy Olze (Letters to Olga)* there is an interesting moment which is quite similar to Havel's anguish at his helplessness at watching the weather woman's terror. Čapek writes that he had heard that Olga had been sick while he was away from Prague. His response to this news is analogous to Havel's anguish. Čapek writes, "There you suffered, and I wasn't with you! I'd like to cause myself some severe pain to know what it is like" (Čapek, 2010, p. 224). The significant feature of this desire to inflict pain on himself is that Čapek's sentiment is full of empathy and a desire for greater empathy. Similarly, Havel's anguish at being unable to help the weather woman is a moment of empathy. Empathy, for Levinas, is an appropriation of difference by the same. That is, for Levinas, empathy is problematic as it is a fallacy to claim that another's experience can be suffered by oneself.

Empathy is a vital component in the brand of humanism supported by Čapek. One of the most important organs for generating empathy is literature. Čapek contends that literature offers examples of the best of life. For Čapek life follows literature and the converse is only a half truth. The examples of living that literature shows offer glimpses at the potential of life to increase its flourishing (Čapek, 2010, pp. 6–7). What is important for Čapek was that literary criticism does not try to silence any form of literary expression. For Čapek it is vital that culture be allowed to consume whatever stories are created, whether deemed to be of value or not. This is a sentiment shared by Havel decades later.<sup>4</sup> What is important to note is that the desire to promote the manifold means of expression has at its heart, not a Levinasian respect for absolute difference, but an attempt to generate more empathy through increased moral imagination. I am here only focused on the example of literature, but the example can be broadened to suggest that for Čapek and Havel, culture (of which literature is a component) is a means of generating moral relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> Havel's speech to the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, delivered on June 9, 1965, lambasted the union for privileging for publication literature which was not critical of the current political situation. Havel forcefully argues for a publication schedule of a wide array of non-ideologically motivated literature in order to give full access to possible literary expression of existential identity (Havel, 1992, pp. 10–35).

Čapek engaged in a series of interviews with Masaryk which was later published as a book (Čapek, 1995). In their conversation, Masaryk placed great emphasis on Children's education through literature. Masaryk, like Havel and Čapek, believed in the reforming power of culture and consequently argued for a more relevant children's literature that would grow children's moral imaginations (Čapek, 1995, pp. 46–52). For Masaryk, the examples depicted in well-crafted literature offer models for emulation. That is the reader understands something about the example and how it applies outside of the context of the book and they then emulate that example. Furthermore, for Masaryk, the examples of literature are conversation starters about acceptable behaviour and the possible directions for culture. These discussions around literature take on the force of directing culture to the most preferred possibility (Čapek, 1995, pp. 46–47). What is significant is the notion that a shared understanding between individuals, obtained through discourse is of paramount importance for morality. This is at odds with the thought of Levinas for whom culture is problematic.

Simon Critchley in his book, *The Problem with Levinas*, argues that culture, for Levinas, is a source of bondage (Critchley, 2015, p. 38). Levinas indeed contends that the forms of cultural expression, prominent amongst the 1968 Parisian protesters, were not only deficient, but false and deceitful (Levinas, 2006, p. 69). For Critchley, Levinas sees the kind of cultural debates that I have presented above through Masaryk, Čapek and Havel, as an error of substituting aesthetic judgements in the place of true ethical thought. Critchley writes that for Levinas these judgements are degenerate forms of the ideal (Critchley, 2015, p. 39). The problematic depiction of the social sciences in 'Without Identity' is further evidence of this. For Levinas, culture spoiled the unformed truth that the youthful mind has access to. Whereas for Čapek, Masaryk, and Havel, there is a strong role for culture in forming the mind of the youth through the development of moral imagination which occurs through pluralistic literary expression. It is for these thinkers the role of culture to show the way to the ideal. Čapek, in his short journalistic piece 'Where is Heaven?' writes "[i]f you find sacredly blooming roses all around you, and a redeemed angel in every human, if everyone is a winged cherub for you... you'll be in heaven" (Čapek, 2010, pp. 13-14). The point for Čapek is that heaven, (the ideal) is within the reach of life and that culture is the means of creating it.

Ernst Cassirer, in a posthumously published critique of Heidegger, quotes the poetry of Schiller to demonstrate the importance of imagination for directing culture.

But free from all the ravages of time...  
 To soar on their wings  
 Cast off dread of the earthly  
 Flee from narrow, stifling life  
 Into the realm of the ideal! (Schiller in Cassirer, 1982, p. 162).

The promise of this poem, for Cassirer, is the possibility of the idea of "life in the idea" (Cassirer, 1982, p. 162). Cassirer is at pains in the critique to show the emptiness of Heidegger's contention that culture and history are inauthentic, and that they sink Dasein in to the impersonal 'they'. As is well known, Cassirer is considered to have lost the Davos debate. However, when we read Havel's uptake of ideas from Masaryk and Čapek, we can note that the humanistic ideas of Cassirer have champions further east.

### **Havel and Postmodern Ethics: the mark of Levinas**

Havel's understanding of the moral foundations of politics owes a massive debt to the humanist thought of Masaryk. Masaryk himself was explicit about his engagement with the philosophy of Herder (Barnard, 1990, p. 23). There is, thus, an underlying acceptance in

Czechoslovakia that the history of western philosophy has not resulted in nihilism. The post-structural moment, in France, which accepted uncritically Heidegger's cherry picked interpretation of the history of western philosophy and the corresponding attack on humanist values, simply did not occur East of Germany. However, it is clear from the above analysis that it is not enough to suggest that Havel and Levinas, despite their differences, should be considered as totally different thinkers. The encounter that Havel has with Levinas thinking is also formative. Hence it is prudent, in the light of the above distinction of the similarities and differences, to spell out just how significant a moment the encounter was for Havel's thinking after the encounter. A useful way for this will be to show some interesting points on which Havel diverges from his humanist forbears.

In *Humanistic Ideals*, Masaryk summarizes his view of morality as follows: "Modern morality... is not founded upon anything which is new. An old and universally acknowledged law is its basis: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Who, however, is my neighbor? We speak of the humanistic ideal. It has for me a dual sense. It means, in the first place, the ideal of manhood: be a man! Secondly, it entails consideration for our fellow humans in the widest sense" (Masaryk, 1971, p. 116). The obviously Christian understanding of morality is significant for understanding Havel's position. Havel, for many scholars is a Christian thinker. He writes continually of being responsible to a higher power which judges him (Havel, 1990, p. 189). Yet there is, in Havel as well, an openness to non-Christian forms of understanding the higher horizon.

An interesting section from the speech 'The Need for Transcendence in a Postmodern World' demonstrates how Havel differs from Masaryk. Havel writes that "the fewer answers the era of rational knowledge provides to the basic questions of human Being, the more deeply it would seem that people, behind its back as it were, cling to the ancient certainties of their tribe. Because of this, individual cultures, increasingly lumped together by contemporary civilization, are realizing with new urgency their own inner autonomy and the inner differences of others" (Havel, 1997, pp. 167–168). The points of specific interest relate to Havel's acceptance of the idea that there is no certainty to be found in the moral world. Where I read Masaryk as entirely confident in his Christian faith, on the other hand Havel accepts that the appearance of the given is tainted by culture. However, Havel's response is not to promote one cultural expression over another; Havel instead demonstrates the cogency in any thinking which privileges the ethical relationship of 'I' to the other (Havel, 1997, p. 168). That is, unlike the post-structuralists, Havel does not accept the postmodern position that a cultural interplay of forms of power is all there is; instead, Havel offers a view of responsibility heavily informed by his reading of Levinas that does not mimic Levinas as Havel still remains consistent with Czech humanism. The close relationship between the thinking of Havel and his mentor Jan Patočka, will demonstrate this.

Writing of Havel's mentor Jan Patočka, Petr Lom writes, "but how then is one to live according to truth, to care for the soul if one admits the basic historicity of man and the relativity of his orientation in the world? And why should this not lead either to despair or the abandonment of philosophy if one acknowledges that two thousand years of philosophy have not yielded incontrovertible certainties? Patočka's answer is that contingency still does not foreclose the possibility of philosophy. For philosophy is rendered possible precisely by the phenomenological fact that we are able to *distance* ourselves from all that is given despite our contingency, a distancing that is always possible because we never experience the world in an incontrovertible, unequivocal manner" (Lom, in Patočka, 2002, p. xviii). The quote can be

applied to Havel just as easily considering Havel's immersion in Patočka's thinking.<sup>5</sup> The key feature of thinking, for Havel, is the ability to call ourselves away from hegemonic ideology and reflect. What we reflect on, according to Havel is our natural and primal orientation towards the other, whom we are responsible for because of this orientation. This understanding of responsibility, common to Czech thinkers (and most prominent in the thinking of Patočka), is described by Martin Matušík as "the birth of the responsible self freed from anonymous everydayness" (Matušík, 2007, p. 51).

Havel advocates a kind of thinking, which is very similar to Levinas' attempt to make dark rather than illuminate the given. That is, by showing the mendacious foundation of any ideological position, Havel feels that he is able to show our primal and prior responsibility. "Transcendence as a deeply and joyously experienced need to be in harmony even with what we ourselves are not, what we do not understand, what seems distant from us in time and space, but with which we are nevertheless mysteriously linked because, together with us, all this constitutes a single world" (Havel, 1997, p. 172). It is important to point out that the "singularity of our world", for Havel is not an entity that intellect can totalize. Like Levinas, Havel advocates a view of our world as a mysterious infinity rather than totality.

Other thinkers have noted the post-modern relevance of Havel's moral understanding of politics. Caroline Bayard sees in Havel's plays, a similarity with the politically directed writing of Jean Francois Lyotard (Bayard, 1990, p. 291). Bayard praises Havel's plays which suggest that in politics no discourse can have primacy over another. She notes that Havel's dissidents in his plays are far less eloquent than are the ideologues, who promote the dominant ideology. Consequently, Havel's dissidents promote an anti-ideology rather than promote a different ideology. Bayard's point is that it is far better to oppose ideology in all its forms than to search for the ideology to replace the current one. With the above analysis in mind, Levinas is a far stronger candidate for comparison than Lyotard as the underlying reason that no discourse can have primacy over another, for Havel, is a Levinasian understanding that discourse can be an aggressive attempt to appropriate the other as the same.

Richard Rorty focuses on Havel's dissent against ideology in his paper, 'The End of Leninism, Havel and Social Hope' (Rorty, 1998, p. 243). Havel's philosophy is pragmatically useful for Rorty as, in Rorty's analysis, Havel is an advocate of social hope rather than hope requiring a metaphysical underpinning such as faith or history; in other words it is a groundless hope. Rorty has been taken to account for apparently misreading, or cherry picking, comments from Havel that advocate his view and ignoring ones which go against his pragmatic philosophy (Deneen, 1999, p. 652). Patrick Deneen writes that Rorty ignores the clear and blatant use of metaphysics to underscore any moral position in Havel. While it is true that Havel is no pragmatist, and that he does use, on occasion, metaphysical language, Havel, as Deneen concedes, does not explain his transcendent - it remains unsaid (Deneen, 1999, p. 582). A position between Rorty's and Deneen's analysis is more appropriate. Havel does seem to offer a groundless metaphysics – other Czech thinkers, most prominently Karel Kosík, have claimed that Havel has dropped the mantle bequeathed to him from his intellectual forbears Masaryk and Patočka, insofar as Havel's focus on concrete political problems made him lose sight of the importance of the ideal (Kosík, 1993, p. 154). However, this approach to Havel's thinking misses not the positing of metaphysical certainty as Deneen presents, but rather the Levinasian critique of philosophy's totalizing claims. Havel has philosophical faith in the undescribed and original ethical outlook.

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<sup>5</sup> I have elsewhere written on the close similarities between Havel's and Patočka's thought (Brennan, 2014, pp. 149–168).

On the other hand, Havel, as stated above, does not follow Levinas' rejection of philosophy to the absolute limit. For Havel, Levinas inspires one to act, not only to reflect. That action is based on the reflection on responsibility. Deneen claims that Havel shares with John Dewey a sense of faith in the ability of man to transform society through his actions alone (Deneen, 1999, p. 607). He writes that our willingness to believe in the narratives which modern societies weave lends modern societies hope for improvement. On this he is right; but there is more to Havel's faith in narratives than the hope they can offer. As Čapek and Masaryk also understood, a healthy and thriving culture explores plurality through art. Havel, after Levinas, aims for a global attempt at privileging the Saying over the Said. Czech-ness, European-ness or Western-ness, are all potentially mendacious identities which conceal a higher responsibility that the 'I' has to each and every human being. Havel writes, "it logically follows that, in today's multicultural world, the truly reliable path to coexistence, to peaceful coexistence and creative cooperation, must start from what is at the root of all cultures and what lies infinitely deeper in human hearts and minds than political opinion, convictions, antipathies, or sympathies - it must be rooted in self-transcendence" (Havel, 1997, p. 172). So, where Masaryk would have us comprehend "in a new light that which we already know", Havel adds the caveat that the task of discerning something new begins from an uncertain infinity of responsibility. This is the aspect of Levinas which quickens Havel.

Finally, the lack of post-structural theory's presence in Prague is significant. Moral philosophy thrived in cities east of Paris. It is interesting that Derrida's moral and political turn in his later works, such as *Specters of Marx*, and *The Gift of Death*, has been dated to his trip to Prague for the Jan Hus Foundation (Peeters, 2013, p. 341). Derrida was arrested, after police discovered drugs which had been planted on him. The experience of oppression at the hands of an oppressive regime had a formative effect on Derrida. It made him acutely aware of the impossibility of divorcing philosophy from politics as when one is oppressed everything is political. During this trip Derrida encountered the thinking of Jan Patočka, and this encounter forms the backbone of one of Derrida's most obviously moral books, *The Gift of Death*. To make a simple point it took an encounter with Prague humanists to turn the Parisian philosopher's attention to responsibility. Derrida's thoughts on responsibility were, in a sense prefigured in Czechoslovak debates.

Havel's Levinas is interesting insofar as Havel willfully rejects one of the main thesis of Levinas' thought – that a true ethical encounter with the other allows the other to remain wholly other. Havel instead sees that although the other is wholly other, the I must act in some way towards it. That is, I am compelled to not only allow the other to be other, but to also act responsibly towards it. Havel is all too aware that under certain political conditions the kind of meditative ethics put forward by Levinas are impossible. My actions will always impact on others so I had better make sure I am as responsible in my actions as I can be. Thus Levinas, for Havel supplies two key insights, firstly, I am always responsible for others, and secondly, that human life has a moral foundation. Thus Havel has a lot of time for Levinas' thoughts on youth. Levinas' youth is an analogy for an unformed energy to be responsible. Havel understands that one simply can't avoid impacting on others. For Havel and Levinas the energy of youth is most desirous of the good world and has yet to be tainted by false hegemonies, and this energy is what philosophy should seek to maintain.

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