

From variations and reflections on topics in Václav Havel's prison letters [1983]

At the end of one of his letters, No. 62, Václav Havel wrote a warning valid not only for his wife, to whom the letter was addressed, but indeed to anyone who might read this particular message from prison, or any of the others. So I must immediately apologize for deciding to ignore that warning, and try to explain my reasons. What Václav Havel said was this:

you mustn't take these and similar meditations too literally; they are only attempts to capture something of the flow of my feelings and inner thoughts; sometimes I map them out with these formulations, at other times I may employ entirely different ones; I'm no philosopher and it is not my ambition to construct a conceptually fixed system; anyone who tries to understand it that way will soon discover that I am perpetually contradicting myself, that I leave many things unexplained, or I explain them differently each time, etc. etc.

If I have to agree – with every regret at such a waste of talent that Václav Havel is no philosopher, he in turn must accept with relief, no doubt – that I am no writer or poet. But for any thinking man his letters, or the reflections contained in them, are a challenge to meditation and self-questioning. Though they do not expound philosophy, they certainly raise exceptionally weighty philosophical issues. I hope neither Václav Havel nor anyone else will see in the pages that follow signs of professional arrogance. But the appropriate reaction, the 'answer' to Havel was, I thought, to put my cards on the table as openly as he had done. Unlike him (compare his letter No. 100) I am not troubled by a yearning for finality; I write best when not committed to a definitive statement, and make no such claims for these 'variations and reflections'.

It's a kind of paradox – I think I mentioned it during your last visit that I, of all people, such a lover of harmony, who wants everyone to like each other and to be kind to each other must live my entire life, in fact, in conflict, tension and nerve-racking situations. [Letter No. 40]

The real paradox lies deeper than the mere fact that people do not achieve their dreams. Human life remains formless if undirected toward any goal. The goal may, as Broch says, be either finite or infinite. A life directed toward a finite goal, or rather toward finite goals, has only a relative and partial form, possibly only a stunted and fragmented one. This is apparent when despite the achievement of finite ends a life is still unfulfilled, unsatisfied, 'unredeemed'. Orientation toward an infinite goal, by contrast, means by definition that it can never be attained, but such a life is endowed with the fulfilment that comes not from reaching its goal but, precisely, from falling ever short of it. The quality of this falling short is, of course, different in a life dedicated only to finite ends, and in one where every relationship to finite ends is controlled by, and subordinated to, the pursuit of infinite ones. One finite project will integrate one part of a man's life, another finite project will integrate another part, but none can effect the integration of a complete human existence, of a life as a single whole. An acute awareness of this leads some people into a special subterfuge by which they defraud and deceive others, incidentally, but primarily themselves. The trick consists in persuading themselves that some aptly chosen finite goal is in fact an infinite one. The aptly chosen finite goal may create the illusion of an infinite goal, and this illusion can in effect integrate their lives. But this kind of integrity, based on a false infinite goal, though real enough, is never genuine – it can only be a false integrity.

What kind of harmony can its devotees be seeking? If we were to accept without further thought the formulation about wanting everyone to be fond of each other and kind to each other', we would risk lapsing into the climate of religious revivalism or of escapist communities weary of life's conflicts. But these and suchlike remedies are only partial ones, since at best such communities can only bring about mutual fondness and kindness among a limited number of people, namely those who have

withdrawn to their latter-day Kunvald¹ from the labyrinth of worldly strife. The infinite goal of the apostle of harmony, that all men should love one another, would thus have been replaced by the finite aim of 'universal' love between members of a new group that had turned its back on the world and its battles. But no real advocate of harmony amongst all men would or could accept such a substitution: his objective is truly universal concord, not concord within a restricted group that meet and join forces just to exercise reciprocal fondness and kindness among its members.

Again, to try and universalize the 'Kunvald' experiment and apply it to everyone would be an equally false solution. Either it would have only a superficial success, involving disgruntlement or even refusal to take life's problems seriously enough, or else it would amount to coercion, with everyone being persuaded or, if that failed, compelled to be kind and affectionate. The fanaticism of 'universal love' leads inevitably to two things directly contrary to love: hatred and still worse perhaps simulated love. For it is no more possible to force people into love than to force them into freedom. (Existentialist talk of being 'condemned to freedom' is either a *recherché* paradox or an intellectual contortion.) All we can do with love and freedom is offer them to others or rather, since neither is really ours to offer, point them out, inform others, that is, that love and liberty are available for them to choose, and therefore constitute a challenge. But harmony, a challenge? That would have to be an infinite goal!

Orientation of one's life toward an infinite goal can only be achieved and then only in a given situation, always subject to renewal, never for good and all – in the context of a daily life committed necessarily to innumerable ends that are finite, and conditioned by other ends and so relative, but nevertheless binding for the moment. Which means that commitment to a finite aim must confront those other commitments, conflict with them repeatedly, and very often sustain defeats and setbacks – yet never, never go totally under. A life committed to an infinite end, however, is not even finally defeated in death. Not by any means, of course, that it can overcome death. Life is not capable of that, but it is capable of robbing death of its victory. Yet to snatch victory from the hands of death, or of chaos (as against harmony) or of hatred (as against love) and so on does not mean engaging in a struggle or battle or making mighty efforts and getting into all kinds of unpleasant conflicts, strains and nerve-racking situations. This is quite logical – neither contrary to logic nor even paradoxical. The paradox lies elsewhere.

Experience shows that harmony advocated and effected by human effort and organization either increases the sum of disharmony-paying for the achievement of harmony in one field, that is, by draining it off, or positively upsetting it, in others or else simply collapses. And only then, from the wreckage, does a real harmony emerge, not for good and all but as a bonus, a gift, as the experience of something which it is in no man's power to bring about deliberately, yet which can never emerge without his labour, his efforts and commitment. Harmony as an infinite goal emerges on its own, here and now, not at the end of the course emerges only when people strive for it, yearn for it, love it and embark for its sake on undertakings where they willingly shoulder all the preliminaries, and fulfil the conditions, for its emergence. It is precisely here that the paradox arises. Genuine harmony never comes to those who seek it for themselves, and for their own group – which always comes to the same thing – but only to those who seek it for others, even at the cost of discord, conflicts, strains and nerve-racking situations for themselves, and their group.

Václav Havel finds it strange, indeed more than strange, that he, who is so fond of harmony, must live practically his entire life amid conflicts and stresses of one kind or another. Speaking purely for myself, let me say that it is just this deplorable circumstance that gives his love of harmony a convincing ring of truth for those who, like him, take harmony seriously enough to live their lives too amid conflicts and stresses. More than that, I feel empowered to tell Václav Havel that his sensitivity

¹ A village in north-east Bohemia where the first community of Czech Brethren was founded in 1456.

as an essayist and playwright gives him not only a heavier, but a more glorious cross to bear than any which we others carry. For it will sometimes result, not merely in things getting on his nerves, in his being intolerant, in his experiencing everything excessively and taking it to heart – it will enable him to savour more often and more intensely the real harmony which instead of trying to acquire for himself and his friends he has helped to prepare the way for, so that it should be granted to others, to the rest of us. Primarily, of course, to those who likewise live amidst stress and conflict. But in the last resort to everybody, as a hope and a promise.

Václav Havel's stresses and conflicts contribute, imponderably but genuinely, to the alleviation of our own difficulties and help us carry our own crosses. Indeed, is it not the case that Václav Havel – and others whom I must not forget at this point have explicitly carried certain burdens on our behalf? And do they not continue to? Was he not chosen as a sacrificial representative, not so much to redeem the rest of us as to intimidate us? What has happened to the world-famous playwright could happen even more easily to people the world knows nothing about. It would have lent great point to the threat if Václav Havel had opted to go straight from prison into exile abroad. We are grateful that the point could not be made. We are grateful that Václav opted to remain with those strains and conflicts which he could never accommodate himself to, and never will. The situation continues and cannot be otherwise, and will evidently remain so. We are more than grateful, even if it all seems strange, very strange, to him.

But is it really?

The above is a translation of the first of the author's five 'Variations and reflections on topics from Václav Havel's prison letters', together with part of his introduction.