A Reappraisal of the Political Philosophy of Václav Havel

Presented By

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Václav Havel presents a cohesive political philosophy which I term liberal agonism. In the thesis I explore the main influences on Havel’s political philosophy. I describe what Havel means by his famous maxim ‘live in truth,’ claiming that what Havel means is that to live in truth, one must continually engage in a process of self-agonism in order to be existentially honest with oneself. Further to this, I claim that in Havel’s writings there is the idea that in order for self-agonism to be fully utilised, the state must take an active interest in encouraging self-agonism through a liberal philosophy.

The thesis explores Havel’s intellectual debt to Martin Heidegger and argues that Havel has a very different philosophy to Heidegger, particularly in respect to the purpose and value of art. Havel sees art as a means for political change and Heidegger sees art as a way to reveal Being. The main influence on Havel is Jan Patočka, and the thesis explores at length the intellectual debt that Havel owes Patočka. Where some scholars see Havel as a repeater of Patočka’s ideas, a better view is that Havel has his own unique engagement with Patočka. From Patočka, Havel acquires an engagement with the Czech phenomenological tradition. His phenomenological outlook informs his political philosophy. Havel also employs the language of existentialism, and hence I compare Havel’s views on authenticity with those of John Paul Sartre, claiming that living in truth is best understood as an existential concept.

I am aware of the breadth of meanings to the term existential and am here using the word to describe a kind of thinking that begins with the human subject. Havel begins his analysis of the human with the existence of man as a given starting point. He is interested in the question ‘what does it mean to be?’ Existentialists approach such a question by exploring the ways that being manifests in the world. That is by looking at the
modes of existence one can explore the meaning of that mode. Existentialism is not a
philosophy that is looking for the thing in itself; rather, existentialists view the human
subject as a being thrown into a practically meaningless universe and attempt to supply
meaning to the subject through reading the actions of a subject as acting in freedom.
That is the freedom of the subject to act, in a meaningless universe, gives the subject's
actions meaning as they are chosen actions. A failure to account for one’s actions to
oneself is to act in an inauthentic way.

Throughout his career Havel demonstrated a mistrust of the way that language can be
ideologically manipulated to coerce behaviour. This thesis demonstrates the importance
of this idea by exploring Havel’s views about political discourse developed through his
plays and selected writings on the issue. After scaffolding Havel’s philosophy through the
examination of his main concerns and major influences, this thesis spells out Havel’s
own unique political philosophy. I argue that a liberal agonism is a political philosophy in
which the state allows, celebrates and encourages a process of self-interrogation through
which existential identities are expressed and acted upon.
Statement of Originality

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material which has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my good friends, Andreas Berg and Russell McPhee, for sharing my enthusiasm and in my search.
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Most importantly, I must acknowledge my primary supervisor Damian Cox. From the infancy of this project, Damian has been an enthusiastic bouncing board for my ideas - not all of them good. His critique has been supportive, scathing, constructive, and always with a view to finding the bigger picture. I have learnt to think better, write better, teach better, and be a better philosopher through my interactions with Damian over the last few years.
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