

PREFACE

Several years before coming with Lech Walesa to Kyiv in 2004 to encourage Ukraine's "Orange Revolution," Vaclav Havel wondered just what Eastern Europeans could offer to affluent and developed democracies in the West. And he concluded, puzzlingly, that "we ought to have given them the benefit . . . of the unique experience given to us by life under totalitarian conditions, and by our resistance to those conditions."¹ When recalled today in 2017, Havel's remark seems to resonate. His words seem to anticipate what some reflective persons have been saying about the primacy of living through, and living by, certain basic ethical values, like sharing the rule of law, and communion.

But if the experience Havel recalled was "unique" in the sense that most Western European countries had not lived through such a basic historical and existential experience, what exactly was the "benefit"? The benefit, Havel claimed, was a lesson. And the lesson was that some historical situations and some events require societies and individuals to undertake fundamental "moral self-examination," an examination of what he called the "moral mind."² Havel asserted that the pervasive conditions of European societies today, although no longer totalitarian, once again require such fundamental ethical scrutiny.

And why?

Because, Havel claimed, the "dictatorship of money, of profit, of constant economic growth, and the necessity . . . of plundering the earth without regard for what will be left in a few

decades . . . cannot effectively be confronted except through a new moral effort, that is, through *a transformation of the spirit* and the human relationship to life and the world.”³ Perhaps Havel’s meaning was unclear, his claims mistaken? On further reflection, however, what Havel was saying is most probably true.

For after the bloodiest of centuries and still at the deeply violent beginnings of who knows what kind of new century, our own times in Europe today are extraordinary in at least two senses. First, these times are doubly “unthinkable”—today, we can neither think the immensities of suffering, nor can we think the immensities of the evils that continue to wreak such suffering. Yet we must think them both. These would seem to be among the serious lessons of our historians. They are also what I have called elsewhere, in a Kantian echo, the lessons of “the negative sublime.”⁴

And, second, our own times in Europe today are also doubly “revolutionary.” The most fundamental pattern of intelligibility that has structured the modern era (the “scientific worldview”) no longer commands a general intellectual consensus. And a similarly most fundamental pattern of intelligibility that might command a new general intellectual consensus (a “post-scientific worldview”?) has yet to crystallize. These would seem to be among the serious lessons of our social scientists.

Such unthinkable immensities and such new revolutions today profoundly affect the understandings and practices of ethical inquiry. For the historical and social substitutions of one absolutely basic pattern of intelligibility for another can leave almost nothing, and especially not ethical inquiry and reflection, unchanged.

Even today, then, Havel’s words are still sobering. They were the words of a thoughtful and experienced person, an ethically reflective and responsible European. Yet we can no longer assume that reflective and responsible Europeans share any general understanding of just what is meant by Havel’s inspiring, but finally mysterious, talk of “a new moral effort,” of undertaking “a new certain moral self-examination,” of moral effort itself

as “*a transformation of the spirit* and the human relationship to life and the world,” and a “moral mind.”

Much less can we assume that reflective and responsible Europeans today share any intellectual consensus as to what is to be understood by a disciplined, sustained, pluralistic, and argued inquiry into the practical ethical matters Havel so importantly brought to our attention. For today, the nature—not just of ethics but of ethical inquiry itself—is newly in question.

At the center of this problematic situation among such reflective persons today is, I think, a widespread set of hesitations, doubts, confusions, questions, and troubling worries about at least two crucial issues.⁵ On the one hand, we need to comprehend more fully just what is the nature of ethical rationality and moral reason. And, on the other, we need to determine freshly just what are the least inappropriate logics, models, idioms, discourses, institutions, and practices with which to fashion a publicly available, philosophically accountable, spiritually responsive version of moral reason and ethical rationality.

The work that follows is presented in the light of those persisting concerns. Much of this work arose from various conferences in Ukraine, Poland, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere. I am very grateful to the conveners of these conferences for their invitations, and to their participants for their critical questions and constructive comments.

As in its companion volume, a monograph entitled *On the Nature and Grounds of Persons*, and once again by way of acknowledgements, I owe sincere thanks for the intellectual challenges, the sensible expectations, and the institutional support in different ways, to the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Ukraine; the Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic; the *Akademie internationale für Philosophie* in Liechtenstein; the *Institut international de philosophie* in Paris; and the Royal Society of Canada in Ottawa.

Specifically, I owe quite special thanks to the professional, collegial, and personal support of Martin Cajthaml, Mariano Crespo, Czeslaw Porebski, Volodymyr Turchynovskyy, Frank

Peddle, and Timothy Tackett. Despite the difficulties of different languages, cultures, and professional trainings, their long and unfailing friendship over many years has made this work so much less imperfect than it sadly must remain. Finally, I owe my deepest thanks and profound respect, indeed, to H el ene Bessi ere and to our family.

Peter McCormick
Paris, February 2017

Endnotes

- 1 Havel was reflecting on how Central and Eastern European countries were ever to discharge the more than merely financial debt to Western European countries for their continuing help after the collapse of totalitarianism. See his “Paying Back the West,” *The New York Review of Books* (23 September 1999), 54 (my italics).
- 2 This is the expression of the Ukrainian philosopher, Viktor Malakhov, in his “Practicing Humaneness and Civic Virtues,” in *Ethics and the Global World: Reflection on Civic Virtues*, ed. V. Turchynovskyy (Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic UP, 2013), 48.
- 3 Havel 1999.
- 4 P. McCormick, *The Negative Sublime: Ethics, Warfare, and the Dark Borders of Reason* (Heidelberg: Universit atsverlag Winter, 2003).
- 5 Cf. for example M. Hayward’s review, “Philosophy vs. Ethics,” of three recent, important books on philosophical ethics in the *Times Literary Supplement [hereafter TLS]* (13 January 2017). Alluding to the conclusion of one of the books reviewed, James Griffin’s 2016 Oxford book, *What Can Philosophy Contribute to Ethics?*, Hayward concurs that, in his own words, “. . . philosophers should abandon the search for systematic, all-encompassing ‘ethical theories’ in place of more limited, local forms of moral criticism and conceptual explication” (p. 26).