

Freedom and the Fearful Symmetry: Theological Reflections on Freedom's Relationship to Truth

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Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

—William Blake

IN THE WINTER OF 1932, when Malcolm Muggeridge was in Moscow as a foreign correspondent, he would often walk the streets and observe the Muscovites. He relates that, as he walked among them, he had a strange, almost mystical certainty that: “As they were, so we were all fated to be. In them, for those with eyes to see, might be discerned the fearful symmetry of things to come.”¹ Muggeridge was captivated by William Blake’s notion of a “fearful symmetry” in creation. Throughout his long literary career, as he made his slow and circuitous journey toward faith and the Catholic Church, Muggeridge deepened his understanding of this symmetry. At first, long before he was a believer, as he reported on the events of the world, he began to notice that they seemed laced with comic irony. Events that at first glance seemed meaningless and absurd, on closer inspection, often seemed perfectly tailored to reveal—and comically punish—human

¹ Malcolm Muggeridge, “The Fearful Symmetry of Freedom,” *Christianity Today*, April 21, 1978, 13.

folly. As he himself would later describe it, the “Theatre of the Absurd proves on closer examination to contain within itself a Theatre of Fearful Symmetry.”² Muggeridge began to discern that there was order underlying apparent confusion, meaning underlying apparent meaninglessness. He began, as he would later describe it, to hear “the still, small voice of truth that makes itself heard above thunderous falsity.”³ From personal experience and observation, he came to believe that freedom was dependent on fidelity to the truth, to both that truth inscribed in nature and the truth who is Christ. Indeed, for Muggeridge, the theatre of fearful symmetry is ultimately the stage of God’s providential action in creation: it is grace mercifully leading each heart to see itself as it truly is and to find its salvation in Christ.

In those desolate years, Muggeridge was not the only one to discover freedom’s dependency on truth or its relationship to Christ. In the summer of 1942, while the Nazis’ reign of terror was in full force throughout Poland, two young intellectuals were clandestinely exchanging letters as they labored to survive in that apocalyptic landscape that was Warsaw. Czesław Miłosz, already a published poet, writing to his friend, Jerzy Andrzejewski, makes the following confession: “The spiritual ruin that has befallen Europe has not passed us by, either; rather, it played out in us first.”⁴ He adds, “How difficult it is to look clearly at oneself and at others, to not tell lies, not create myths.”⁵ Miłosz, however, joins his voice with those who affirm that “what constitutes the sickness of contemporary culture is the repudiation of truth for the sake of action. . . . Like Pilate, [contemporary] culture asked, ‘What is truth?’ and washed its hands.”⁶ The Polish poet adds wistfully, “Does not the same yearning that I feel in myself resonate in millions of human beings?”⁷ Others in Poland were filled with a similar yearning. The young Karol Wojtyła, for example, who at that moment was a clandestine seminarian in Krakow, had penned a play in which he affirmed, “One must throw truth across the path

² Malcolm Muggeridge, *Conversion: The Spiritual Journey of a Twentieth Century Pilgrim* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 69.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Czesław Miłosz, Letter to Jerzy Andrzejewski, August 22, 1942, in Czesław Miłosz, *Legends of Modernity: Essays and Letters from Occupied Poland, 1942–1943*, trans. Madeline G. Levine (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 151.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 157.

⁷ Ibid., 158.

of lies. One must throw truth into the eye of a lie.” This is so because “in truth are freedom and excellence,” while the betrayal of truth leads only to slavery.⁸ Later, when Wojtyła was Pope, he would offer his mature Christological reflections on freedom’s dependency on truth:

Jesus Christ meets the man of every age, including our own, with the same words: ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’ (Jn 8:32). These words contain both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship with regard to truth as a condition for authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, . . . every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world.⁹

Others in central and eastern Europe were making a similar discovery, and often in surprising ways. Muggeridge himself draws our attention to a case that he explicitly describes as revealing God’s fearful symmetry: a case of one who discovered true freedom while in prison, the case of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.¹⁰

At the very moment that Miłosz and Wojtyła were reflecting on freedom’s relationship to truth, Solzhenitsyn was fighting at the front as a captain in the Red Army. A thoroughly indoctrinated and committed communist, he showed few signs of what he would later become. Toward the end of the war, however, he was thrown in prison for supposedly anti-Stalinist views carelessly expressed in a letter. So began an eight-year odyssey that would lead him through the Soviet system of prisons and prison camps that he would make famous as the Gulag archipelago. Against all expectation, and contrary to the effect that the camps usually had on an inmate’s character, Solzhenitsyn followed the path of a select but happy few, a path that led him to discover truths about himself and the nature of freedom. His transformation began with a renunciation: “As soon

⁸ Karol Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, trans. Boleslaw Tabor-ski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 109 and 103, respectively, cited by Kenneth Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: the Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 7.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), §12.

¹⁰ Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 17.

as you have renounced that aim of ‘surviving at any price,’ and gone where the calm and simple people go—then imprisonment begins to transform your former character in an astonishing way. To transform it in a direction most unexpected to you.”¹¹ The first effect was patience and a new tolerance:

Formerly you never forgave anyone. You judged people without mercy. . . . And now an understanding mildness has become the basis of your uncategorical judgments. You have come to realize your own weakness—and you can therefore understand the weakness of others. And be astonished at another’s strength. And wish to possess it yourself.¹²

Solzhenitsyn famously adds that “it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.”¹³ Solzhenitsyn carried from his prison years “this essential experience: *how* a human being becomes evil and *how* good.”¹⁴ The key, for Solzhenitsyn, was an individual’s relationship to truth: “Anyone who has once proclaimed violence as his *method* must inexorably choose the lie as his *principle*.” And when a government imposes dictatorial violence, “more often than not it demands of its subject only that they pledge allegiance to lies, that they participate in falsehood.”¹⁵ Thus, as Solzhenitsyn explains in his Nobel Lecture: “The simple act of an ordinary brave man is not to participate in lies, not to support false actions! His rule: Let that come into the world, let it even reign supreme—only not through me.”¹⁶ When Solzhenitsyn was finally expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, he explained this idea more fully:

¹¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005*, ed. by Edward E. Ericson, Jr., and Daniel J. Mahoney (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009), 261.

¹² Ibid., 262.

¹³ Ibid., 265.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1970 Nobel Lecture on Literature, in *Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 526.

¹⁶ Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Lecture, 526.

It is not every day and not on every shoulder that violence brings down its heavy hand: It demands of us only a submission to lies, a daily participation in deceit—and this suffices as our fealty. And therein we find, neglected by us, the simplest, the most accessible key to our liberation: a *personal nonparticipation in lies!* Even if all is covered by lies, even if all is under their rule, let us resist in the smallest way: Let their rule hold *not through me!*¹⁷

Solzhenitsyn even developed a nine-point list of principles, each of which expresses a concrete refusal to live by lies, and a commitment “to live by the truth.”¹⁸ For Solzhenitsyn, the first consequence of a commitment to live by the truth is personal repentance. He explains that, once we recognize the bitter truth that the dividing line between good and evil passes through the heart of each of us, then the only way forward is “repentance and the search for our own errors and sins”: “Repentance is the first bit of firm ground underfoot, the only one from which we can go forward not to fresh hatreds but to concord. Repentance is the only starting point for spiritual growth. For each and every individual. And every trend of social thought.”¹⁹ Solzhenitsyn’s writings, with their affirmation that life in the truth was the sole road to freedom and spiritual growth, articulated the experiences of an ever growing number of people living within the Soviet bloc. Indeed, it emboldened them more fully to refuse to live the lie.

One person encouraged by Solzhenitsyn’s thought was the Czech playwright Václav Havel, who, in the Fall of 1978, wrote the lengthy political essay “The Power of the Powerless.”²⁰ While Solzhenitsyn understood fidelity to the truth as ultimately fidelity to Christ, becoming himself an Orthodox Christian believer, Havel was an agnostic when he began his political reflections on freedom’s relationship to truth. Nevertheless, his understanding of life in the truth articulated the experience of many religious believers, both

¹⁷ Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not by Lies!” in *Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 557–58.

¹⁸ Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not by Lies!” 559. See also Solzhenitsyn, “We Have Ceased To See the Purpose,” in *Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 593.

¹⁹ Solzhenitsyn, “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations,” in *Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 530.

²⁰ Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *Open Letters: Selected Prose, 1964–1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 125–214.

in Czechoslovakia and in Poland. Havel's essay was an attempt to describe accurately the situation in Czechoslovakia and to suggest a possible future for his country. To do this, he began by articulating the role of lies, of ideology, in the totalitarian regimes as they then functioned within the Soviet bloc. Havel portrayed ideology as a false but apparently high-minded vision of the world that both reinforces the government's dictatorial power and renders it more palatable. The greengrocer who places the political slogan among the vegetables or the office worker who posts a similar slogan on the bulletin board, why do they do it? Havel argues that most do it because it is easier and even more comforting than trying to resist the tide of conformity. "Ideology," Havel explains, "offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them. . . . It is a veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo."²¹ It thus provides both oppressors and their victims "with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe."²² Havel further notes that "Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them."²³ In language reminiscent of Solzhenitsyn, Havel describes this as living within a lie: "They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it."²⁴ Havel became fascinated by the human capacity to live illusion, to conform one's life to a world of lies:

Human beings are compelled to live within a lie, but they can be compelled to do so only because they are in fact capable of living in this way. . . . Each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to terms with living within the lie. Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his inherent humanity, and to utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudolife.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 133–34.

²² Ibid., 134.

²³ Ibid., 136.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 144–45.

Havel argues, however, that it need not be the case. He affirms confidently that the “essential aims of life are present naturally in every person.”²⁶ Havel had this confidence because of the experience of alienation that comes from living in the lie:

Individuals can be alienated from themselves only because there is something in them to alienate. The terrain of this violation is their authentic existence. Living the truth is thus woven directly into the texture of living a lie. It is the repressed alternative, the authentic aim to which living a lie is an inauthentic response. Only against this background does living a lie make any sense: it exists because of that background. In its excusatory, chimerical rootedness in the human order, it is a response to nothing other than the human predisposition to truth. Under the orderly surface of the life of lies, therefore, there slumbers the hidden sphere of life in its real aims, of its hidden openness to truth.²⁷

This fact helped Havel explain what was happening under the surface of Czechoslovakian society in the late 1970s. A growing number of ordinary Czechs and Slovaks were refusing to live the lie, to post the party slogans, to vote in rigged elections, to participate in a sham consensus. This refusal was the first step. Next, there were those who had begun the positive quest to live in the truth, the truth about how to make quality beer, or run an efficient grocery, or other homely truths about the arts and agriculture or the sciences. Havel explains that, once a person attempts to articulate this to others—to organize a meeting with other grocers or to teach underground classes on making good Pilsen lager—and joins with others who wish to do the same, something new is born that Havel describes as the “independent spiritual, social, and political life of society.”²⁸ Pope John Paul II would later describe this as the “subjectivity of society.”²⁹ Gradually, people begin to develop “parallel structures,” or even a “parallel *polis*,” where the members of society can pursue together the real ends of human life.³⁰ Havel has in mind here underground

²⁶ Ibid., 145.

²⁷ Ibid., 148.

²⁸ Ibid., 176.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), §46.

³⁰ Havel, “Power of the Powerless,” 192–93. The Czech poet Ivan Jirous had already introduced the notion of a “Second Culture” to describe the under-

universities, theatres, trade unions, music groups and any other associations that provide space for the collective and free pursuit of the authentic aims of human life. Writing in 1978, Havel judged that this was as far as the resistance movements had gotten.³¹ He predicted, however, that one possible outcome would be the peaceful collapse of the regime and the emergence of a democratic society where the state itself would protect and foster these intermediate associations.³² In essence, Havel sketched the features of the velvet revolution that would erupt ten years later.³³ As the Polish dissident journalist Adam Michnik noted in April of 1989, on the eve of free elections in Poland and several months before the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia,

ground music scene emerging in Prague during the 1970s, but as Havel himself notes, it was an essay by the Czech Catholic intellectual Václav Benda published in the underground *Samizdat* press in May 1978 that introduced the notion of a “parallel polis.” See Václav Benda, “The Parallel Polis,” in *Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia*, ed. by H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 35–41. It is important to note that Benda and Havel never saw these parallel structures as a flight from society, but instead as the only responsible engagement with society that was left open to responsible citizens. The goal was not flight, but rather, responsible engagement: “It would be quite wrong to understand the parallel structures and the parallel polis as a retreat into a ghetto and as an act of isolation, addressing itself only to the welfare of those who had decided on such a course, and who are indifferent to the rest. It would be wrong, in short, to consider it an essentially group solution that has nothing to do with the general situation. Such a concept would, from the start, alienate the notion of living within the truth from its proper point of departure, which is concern for others, transforming it ultimately into just another more sophisticated version of living within a lie. . . . Even the most highly developed forms of life in the parallel structures, even that most mature form of the parallel polis can only exist—at least in post-totalitarian circumstances—when the individual is at the same time lodged in the ‘first,’ official structure by a thousand different relationships, even though it may only be the fact that one buys what one needs in their stores, uses their money, and obeys their laws” (Havel, “Power of the Powerless,” 194–95).

³¹ Havel, “Power of the Powerless,” 193–94: “These parallel structures, it may be said, represent the most articulated expressions so far of living within the truth.”

³² Ibid., 204.

³³ See George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 159–90. See also Zdenek Kavan and Bernard Wheaton, *The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988–1991* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), and Pavel Mücke and Miroslav Vanek, *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Havel's goal was not just political change, but spiritual freedom. Reflecting on Poland's new freedoms, Michnik shared that Havel's essay had offered them a clear call: "Don't succumb to hatred; don't give in to despair. So that we can protect spiritual freedom, and build—even in prison, as Václav did—some foundation for a community of 'those who were not indifferent.'"³⁴

Christians, both in Czechoslovakia and in Poland, embraced Havel's analysis because it described well their own experience.³⁵ They too had discovered that, under the orderly surface of the life of lies, there slumbers the hidden sphere of life in its real aims, of life in the truth. There was this difference, however: like Muggeridge, they had discerned "the still, small voice of truth" and discovered that this truth was not a "what," but a "who." Moreover, their openness to the truth was actually experienced as a response to a truth that sought them out, that had been humbly present to them all along, suffering with them and revealing to them the Father's love: in short, their encounter with the truth revealed itself to be an encounter with the Christ, the Word made flesh, God among them. Pope John Paul was especially attentive to this experience. As noted above, John Paul affirms that "Jesus Christ meets the man of every age, including our own, with the same words: 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:32)."³⁶ It is in this context that Jesus's words to Pilate become especially significant: "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). Jesus adds, "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (ibid.). John Paul interprets this passage by asking a series of rhetorical questions that reflect the experience of oppressed Christians through the ages:

In the course of so many centuries, of so many generations, from the time of the Apostles on, is it not often Jesus Christ himself that has made an appearance at the side of people judged for the sake of the truth? And has he not gone to death

³⁴ Adam Michnik, "Welcome to Freedom, Václav," in Václav Havel and Adam Michnik, *An Uncanny Era: Conversations Between Václav Havel and Adam Michnik*, ed. and trans. Elzbieta Matynia (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 29–30.

³⁵ See Václav Benda, "Catholicism and Politics," *International Journal of Politics* 15 (1985–1986): 110–24.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §12.

with people condemned for the sake of the truth? Does he ever cease to be the continuous spokesman and advocate for the person who lives 'in spirit and truth' (Jn 4:23)? Just as he does not cease to be it before the Father, he is it also with regard to the history of man.³⁷

John Paul wrote these reflections at virtually the same moment that Havel was writing his influential analysis, a full ten years before the revolutions that tumbled the totalitarian regimes in their two countries.³⁸ These works had an electrifying effect on their readers and were quickly integrated into discussions taking place throughout the Soviet Bloc because they articulated the experiences of many. For example, Jerzy Popiełuszko, the Polish priest who was chaplain to the Solidarity movement, proclaimed these ideas forcefully in a homily three years later:

In order to remain spiritually free, we must live in truth. To live in truth means to bear witness to it to the outside world at all times and in all situations. The truth is unchangeable. It cannot be destroyed by any decree or law. The source of our captivity lies in the fact that we allow lies to reign, that we do not denounce them, that we do not protest against their existence every day of our lives, that we do not confront lies with the truth but keep silent or pretend that we believe in the lies. Thus we live in a state of hypocrisy. Courageous witness to

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Unforeseen circumstances in 1978 led both Havel and Wojtyła to write down ideas that had been percolating independently in each of them for a number of years. For Havel, it was his meeting with the Polish journalist and dissenter Adam Michnik in the Krkonoše mountains on the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia that August. The relatively less repressed situation of the press in Poland offered Havel a new outlet for his writing, which Michnik promised to publish. Havel began writing "Power of the Powerless" in October 1978, sending the final version to Michnik in mid-November (see Havel and Michnik, *An Uncanny Era*, 1–10, 23–26). For Karol Wojtyła, it was his election as pope on October 16, 1978. Wojtyła subsequently affirmed that he began work on his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, "immediately" after his election (see George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: the Biography of Pope John Paul II* [New York: Harper Collins, 1999], 288). This means that, although Havel finished "Power of the Powerless" before John Paul finished *Redemptor Hominis*, there was a period of overlapping composition in late October 1978. Both documents would subsequently be published in 1979.

the truth leads directly to freedom. A man who bears witness to the truth can be free even though he might be in prison.³⁹

For Fr. Popiełuszko, although Christians are called to proclaim the truth, they cannot coerce others to accept it. In other words, the fidelity to truth that brings freedom is a fidelity that cannot be coerced. The mission of Christ, therefore, was an invitation to freedom in the truth: “The whole activity of Jesus Christ was aimed at making people realize that they were created for the freedom of the children of God. God created man in his image, so he is free; indeed, man can accept or reject his Creator, love would not exist if we were *forced* to love.”⁴⁰ Popiełuszko recognized that this respectful invitation to the truth makes us vulnerable, and thus it ultimately leads to the cross.

Through Christ’s death and resurrection the Cross—a symbol of disgrace—became a symbol of courage, virtue, help and brotherhood. In the sign of the Cross we embrace today all that is most beautiful and valuable in man. Through the Cross we go on to resurrection. There is no other way. And therefore the crosses of our country, our personal crosses and those of our families, must lead to victory, to resurrection, if we are united with Christ who conquered the Cross.⁴¹

Jerzy Popiełuszko would ultimately live this truth to the full, being tortured and killed by Poland’s Security Police in October of 1984.⁴² Not surprisingly, therefore, when Pope John Paul later reflected upon the events that led to the fall of the dictatorial regimes in central and eastern Europe, he underlined the central role of Christ and his Cross:

³⁹ Jerzy Popiełuszko, “Homily, *Masses for the Country*, October 31, 1982,” in Grazyna Silorska, *Jerzy Popiełuszko, A Martyr for the Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 56.

⁴⁰ Jerzy Popiełuszko, “Homily, *Masses for the Country*, February, 1983” (Silorska, *Popiełuszko*, 51).

⁴¹ Jerzy Popiełuszko, “Homily, *Masses for the Country*, September, 1982” (Silorska, *Popiełuszko*, 52).

⁴² See John Moody and Roger Boyes, *The Priest and the Policeman: the Courageous Life and Cruel Murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko* (New York: Summit Books, 1987). In 2009, Fr. Popiełuszko was posthumously awarded Poland’s highest civil decoration, the Order of the White Eagle; in 2010 he was beatified by the Church.

Undoubtedly, the struggle which led to the changes of 1989 called for clarity, moderation, suffering and sacrifice. In a certain sense, it was a struggle born of prayer, and it would have been unthinkable without immense trust in God, the Lord of history, who carries the human heart in his hands. It is by uniting his own sufferings for the sake of truth and freedom to the sufferings of Christ on the Cross that man is able to accomplish the miracle of peace and is in a position to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to evil and the violence which, under the illusion of fighting evil, only makes it worse.⁴³

It is through the mystery of Christ's Cross and our participation in it that Christians can freely live the truth. As Saint Paul affirms, "for freedom Christ set us free" (Gal 5:1). He does this by sending his Spirit into our hearts: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). Through the Spirit's action, we are configured to Christ, and begin to live the freedom that comes from living the life of charity: "For through the Spirit, by faith, we await the hope of righteousness, . . . by faith working through love" (Gal 5:5, 6). Pope John Paul, early in his papacy, had underlined charity's relationship to true freedom: "Christ teaches us that the best use of freedom is charity, which takes concrete form in self-giving and in service. For this 'freedom Christ has set us free' (Gal 5:1; cf. 5:13) and ever continues to set us free."⁴⁴

Christians through the centuries have experienced that one grows in this freedom by stages. As St. Augustine proclaims, "the beginning of freedom" is the freedom not to sin mortally: "[It is] to be free from crimes . . . such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege and so forth. When once one is without these crimes (and every Christian should be without them), one begins to lift up one's head towards freedom. But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom."⁴⁵ Perfect freedom, for Augustine, is not freedom *from*, but freedom *for*; it is the freedom to engage in the morally beautiful actions of the virtues, all of which are ways of loving God and

⁴³ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, §25.

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §21.

⁴⁵ St. Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* 41.10: (CCL 36:363, cited in Pope John Paul II, *Veritas Splendor* [1993], §13).

neighbor.⁴⁶ Unlike the pagan conception of virtue, however, these excellences are not something that comes from us or from our own ethical gymnastics: these excellences come from God as habitual gifts of his grace.⁴⁷ Paul states this very clearly, when he affirms, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13), and when he tells the Philippians, "God is at work in you both to will and to do" (Phil 2:13). Paul experiences this divine empowerment as a new life made possible in Christ: "for me life is Christ and death is gain" (Phil 1:21). The fact that this freedom for excellence is a gift is ever before Paul's eyes, for he remains keenly aware of his own poverty: "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7). It was famously while asking the Lord three times to remove "a thorn in the flesh" that Paul received from God the assurance that "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Thomas Aquinas describes this divine affirmation as "a marvelous way of speaking" (*mirus modus loquendi*), exclaiming, "To affirm that virtue is made perfect in weakness is like saying that fire grows in water!"⁴⁸ This recognition of the contrast between the poverty of what we are on our own and what we can do in Christ is at the heart of Muggeridge's conception of the theatre of fearful symmetry. It is what transforms the human tragedy into a divine comedy, a comedy that keeps us joyful and even laughing in the midst of the sorrows of this life.

Václav Havel developed the view that what the peoples of central and eastern Europe were suffering in the 1970s was but a concentrated and intensified version of what all peoples in Europe and the United States were confronting: a society "which has renounced the absolute, which ignores the natural world and distains its impera-

⁴⁶ See Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* 1.15.25 (PL, 32:1322) and *City of God* 15.22 (PL, 41:467). For the contrast between these two types of freedom, see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed., trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 327–78.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms* 83.11 (PL, 37:1065–66); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 63, a. 3; Aquinas, *De virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10. See also Servais-Th. Pinckaers, *Morality: the Catholic View* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 70–72.

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Super 2 Cor*, ch. 12, lec. 3, Marietti no. 479 (my translation from the Marietti edition).

tives.”⁴⁹ For Havel, what they were experiencing in Czechoslovakia was the fusion of “dictatorship and the consumer society” that offered an “inflated caricature of modern life in general” and that could serve as “a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies.”⁵⁰ Havel, therefore, shared with Muggeridge the view that the experience of the countries of the Soviet bloc belonged to “the fearful symmetry of things to come.”

Havel was especially sensitive to the effects on the natural world of consumer society, both in the East and in the West. He articulated fidelity to the truth as fidelity to nature and our place in it, affirming that “we must draw our standards from our natural world, heedless of ridicule, and reaffirm its denied validity.”⁵¹ Havel’s experiences on the world stage as the democratically elected president of the Czech Republic only confirmed him in his belief that unbridled consumerism was both destroying the natural world and creating new forms of enslavement. Havel ruefully recognized that “everything is infinitely more complex than we naïvely imagined when we were in prison.”⁵² After nearly ten years in office, he reflected that, “if our civilization does not somehow deepen spiritually, if it doesn’t realize anew its own spiritual roots, if it doesn’t start to respect moral principles, we are threatened with a disintegration of our human bonds, the loss of a sense of responsibility, and totally unbridled self-interest. This problem concerns our whole civilization, not just the post-Communist states.”⁵³ After he was out of office, Havel continued to worry about contemporary society’s ongoing disregard for nature: “I don’t know whether civilization on its own will come to its senses without huge quakes or tsunamis. In any case I feel the need for some existential revolution. Something has to change in the mentality of people.”⁵⁴ He never abandoned his conviction that freedom depends on fidelity to truth, a truth that is discovered through a communal engagement with the natural world as we pursue together the real ends of human life. Havel even saw signs of hope in the “various civic organizations” (unions, associations, initiatives, etc.) working to address local and

⁴⁹ Václav Havel, “Politics and Conscience,” in *Open Letters*, 261–62.

⁵⁰ Havel, “Power of the Powerless,” 145.

⁵¹ Havel, “Politics and Conscience,” 267.

⁵² Havel, “Everything Is Still in Motion: Prague, November 1998,” in Havel and Michnik, *An Uncanny Era*, 107.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁴ Havel, “On Existential Revolution: Warsaw, November 15, 2008,” in Havel and Michnik, *An Uncanny Era*, 153–54.

international problems, seeing these “microcommunities” as places of moral formation.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Havel was confronting the limitations of nature as a ground for moral renewal. Malcolm Muggeridge would himself eventually recognize this. For Muggeridge, the fearful symmetry of creation was not nature alone, but nature as redeemed by Christ. It was nature as the playground of grace. Muggeridge articulated this by turning to the Patristic notion of nature as a parable, a notion he discovered from his reading of John Henry Newman. Newman holds that to see the world as the early Church did was to recognize that: “The exterior world, political and historical, was but the manifestation to our senses of realities greater than itself. Nature was a parable; Scripture was an allegory, pagan literature, philosophy and mythology, properly understood, were but a preparation for the Gospel.”⁵⁶ For patristic authors such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria, the book that should guide our study of nature is *Ecclesiastes*: “Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity” (Eccl 1:2). For these authors, armed with such a field guide, the study of the natural world reveals both the beauty and goodness of creation and its broken and fleeting character. From our study of nature (of ourselves and of everything else), we can discern principles concerning how to live and our inability, on our own, to live according to these natural-law principles. As such, the study of nature prepares us to receive the merciful instruction of Christ and be integrated into the dynamic life of his body, the Church. Havel, therefore, expresses a deep truth when he affirms that “we must honor with the humility of the wise the limits of that natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence.”⁵⁷ That something is the mercy of God written in the symmetry of redeemed creation. Ultimately, the temptation to live according to the lie is as old as the Fall, where our first parents first encountered the “father of lies” (John 8:44). But in the fearful symmetry of God, the Fall was also the occasion of the promise: the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁶ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (New York: Random House, 1950), 55, cited in Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom*, 10. Newman notes that he is here alluding to the poetical volume *Nature a Parable: A Poem in Seven Books* (London: Rivington, 1842) by the Patristics scholar and Catholic convert John Brande Morris.

⁵⁷ Havel, “Politics and Conscience,” 267.

Protoevangelium that promised the woman an offspring who would vanquish the liar and his lies (Gen 3:9–15): “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it” (John 1:5).⁵⁸ We therefore can participate joyfully in the comic theater of God’s fearful symmetry because we know, along with John Paul the Great, that “Jesus Christ meets the man of every age, including our own, with the same words: ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’ (John 8:32).” N·V

⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §410.