

and its superpersonal origin, for the absolute—can we arrive at a state in which life on this earth is no longer threatened by some form of “megasuicide” and becomes bearable, has, in other words, a genuinely human dimension. This direction, and this direction alone, can lead to the creation of social structures in which a person can once more be a person, a specific human personality.

*Does this mean you refuse to take a position on systemic problems, and instead suggest that mankind wait for a moral and spiritual revival before tackling a solution?*

In the first place: As I understand it, spiritual renewal (I once called it an “existential revolution”) is not something that one day will drop out of heaven into our laps, or be ushered in by a new messiah. It is a task that confronts us all, every moment of our existence. We all can and must “do something about it,” and we can do it here and now. No one else can do it for us, and therefore we can’t wait for anyone else. I could point to a great deal of evidence to show that this is already going on. Aren’t there a lot of people in the world who aren’t apathetic yet and are trying to “do something about it”? That’s the first thing.

The second thing: Whatever transformations or shifts take place in the intellectual and moral sphere are not happening somewhere outside or above the world, in some kind of other world, but here and now, on the terrain of our social life. They’re only visible, we only know about them at all, because of their social impact. They “take place” through social life and in it, somewhat the way a sculptor’s idea “takes place” in the material he uses. Therefore it’s not true that you should first think up an idea for a better world and only then “put it into practice,” but, rather, through the fact of your existence in the world, you create the idea or manifest it—create it, as it were, from the “material of the world,” articulate it in the “language of the world.”

*So you do have a more concrete notion of a better social system after all?*

I’ve already admitted to having one. The traditional political debate between the right and the left revolves around the ownership of the means of production, to put it in Marxist terms: that is, around the question of whether business enterprises should be privately run or made public property. Frankly, I don’t see that that is the main problem. I would put it this way: The most important thing is that man should be the measure of all structures, including economic structures, and not that man be made to measure for those structures. The most important thing is not to lose sight of personal relationships—i.e., the relationships between man and his co-workers, between subordinates and their superiors, between man and his work, between this work and its consequences, and so on.

An economy that is totally nationalized and centralized (i.e., run by the command system), such as we’re familiar with in our country, has a catastrophic effect on all such relationships. An ever-deepening chasm opens up between man and the economic system, which is why this type of economy works so badly. Having lost his personal relationship to his work, his company, to the many decisions about the substance and the purpose of his work and its consequences, he loses interest in the work itself. The company allegedly belongs to everyone, but in reality it belongs to no one. A worker’s activity is dissipated in the anonymous, automatic functioning of the system, for which no one is responsible and which no one understands. All the natural motive forces of economic life, such as human inventiveness and enterprise, just payment for work done, market relations, competition, and so on, are scrapped. No one is properly paid, or properly punished, for the results of his work. People lose—and this is the worst of all—any contact whatsoever with the meaning of their work. Everything falls into the enormous pit of impersonal, anonymous, automatic economic functioning, from work done by

the least hired hand right up to decisions made by the bureaucrats in the office of central planning.

All this is notoriously familiar. At the same time, I don't believe that we can wave a magic wand and dispose of these problems by a change of ownership, or that all we need do to remedy the situation is bring back capitalism. The point is that capitalism, albeit on another level and not in such trivial forms, is struggling with the same problems (alienation, after all, was first described under capitalism): it is well known, for instance, that enormous private multinational corporations are curiously like socialist states; with industrialization, centralization, specialization, monopolization, and finally with automation and computerization, the elements of depersonalization and the loss of meaning in work become more and more profound everywhere. Along with that goes the general manipulation of people's lives by the system (no matter how inconspicuous such manipulation may be, compared with that of the totalitarian state). IBM certainly works better than the Škoda plant, but that doesn't alter the fact that both companies have long since lost their human dimension and have turned man into a little cog in their machinery, utterly separated from what, and for whom, that machinery is working, and what the impact of its product is on the world. I would even say that, from a certain point of view, IBM is worse than Škoda. Whereas Škoda merely grinds out the occasional obsolete nuclear reactor to meet the needs of backward CO-MECON members, IBM is flooding the world with ever more advanced computers, while its employees have no influence over what their product does to the human soul and to human society. They have no say in whether it enslaves or liberates mankind, whether it will save us from the apocalypse or simply bring the apocalypse closer. Such "megamachinery" is not constructed to the measure of man, and the fact that IBM is capitalist, profit-oriented, and efficient while Škoda is socialist, money-losing, and inefficient, seems secondary to me.

Perhaps it is clearer now what kind of "systemic notions" I favor. The most important thing today is for economic units to maintain—or, rather, renew—their relationship with individuals, so that the work those people perform has human substance and meaning, so that people can see into how the enterprise they work for works, have a say in that, and assume responsibility for it. Such enterprises must have—I repeat—a human dimension; people must be able to work in them as people, as beings with a soul and a sense of responsibility, not as robots, regardless of how primitive or highly intelligent they may be. It isn't easy to find an economic expression of this indicator, but I think it's more important than all the other economic indicators we've managed to isolate so far.

But it's not just man as worker that we're concerned about; it's the general meaning of his work. And to my mind the criterion for that should be, again, the human quality of that work in the broadest sense of the word, not just production quantity, or an abstract "quality *per se*." Again, this is hard to express in whatever bell curve of economic growth you choose, capitalist or socialist. For example, it's important that man have a home on this earth, not just a dwelling place; it's important that his world have an order, a culture, a style; it's important that the landscape be respected and cultivated with sensitivity, even at the expense of growth in productivity; it's important that the secret inventiveness of nature, its infinite variety, the inscrutable complexity of its interconnections, be honored; it's important that cities and streets have their own face, their own atmosphere, their own style; it's important that human life not be reduced to stereotypes of production and consumption, but that it be open to all possibilities; it's important that people not be a herd, manipulated and standardized by the choice of consumer goods and consumer television culture, whether this culture is offered to him by three giant competing capitalist networks or a single giant noncompetitive socialist network. It is important, in short, that the

superficial variety of one system, or the repulsive grayness of the other, not hide the same deep emptiness of life devoid of meaning.

Given this, I would tend to favor an economic system based on the maximum possible plurality of many decentralized, structurally varied, and preferably small enterprises that respect the specific nature of different localities and different traditions and that resist the pressures of uniformity by maintaining a plurality of modes of ownership and economic decision-making. From private (indispensable in the area of crafts, trades, services, small business, and retail enterprises and areas of agriculture and, of course, in culture as well) through various types of cooperative and shareholding ventures, collective ownerships (connected with self-management schemes), right up to state ownership. Nothing in this, of course, should be allowed, in its own area, to preclude the genesis of anything different. Any eventual central regulation of this variegated economic scene (and some degree of minimal regulation is essential) should be based on nothing more than a highly evolved sensitivity to what contributes to the general good of the human being, and what, on the contrary, limits and destroys it. The referee in such matters, of course, could not be a state bureaucracy but a democratically elected political body that relies on a continuing dialogue between public opinion and expert opinion.

As for the political system, I would not depend too heavily on the traditional approach, with two or three large political parties, as the only possible guarantee of democracy. If all power in the communist countries is in the hands of a bureaucratic apparatus run by a single political party, then this, understandably, is worse than if there are two parties, both of which are held in check by freely expressed public opinion, and between which the public can choose in elections. But that's not ideal either. It would seem to make more sense if, again, people rather than political parties were elected (that is, if people could be elected without party affiliation). Poli-

ticians would solicit the support of the electors as individuals in their own right, not merely as appendages to the megamachinery of parties or as party favorites. There should be no limit to the number of political parties, but they should, rather, be something like political clubs, where people could refine their opinions, get to know each other personally, and seek to determine who among them would be the best to administer the affairs of the *pols*. Parties should not take direct part in elections, nor should they be allowed to give anyone, *a priori*, the crutches of power. In other words, they should not participate directly in power, since when they do they inevitably become bureaucratic, corrupt, and undemocratic. They should instead provide those who participate in power—having been elected—with an intellectual base, with ideas, with opportunities to hone their opinions.

I'm not against solidarity and cohesiveness among a wide variety of interest groups and associations that share common views. I'm only against anything that obscures personal responsibility or gives anyone perks as a reward for obedience to a group that is aiming to take power.

That is my personal "utopia." I don't like talking about it, and you've been the first to force me to put it into words. I hope that even these brief, hesitant remarks will confirm my notion that a genuinely fundamental and hopeful improvement in "systems" cannot happen without a significant shift in human consciousness, and that it cannot be accomplished through a simple organizational trick. It's hard to imagine the kind of system I've tried to describe here coming about unless man, as I've said, "comes to his senses." This is something no revolutionary or reformer can bring about; it can be only the natural expression of a more general state of mind, the state of mind in which man can see beyond the tip of his own nose and prove capable of taking on—under the aspect of eternity—responsibility even for the things that don't immediately concern him, and relinquish something of his private interest in favor of the interest of the community, the general

interest. Without such a mentality, even the most carefully considered project aimed at altering systems will be for naught.

*Do you think that any essential change in perception, thought, the hierarchy of values, and so on is possible at all without a war, or some kind of ecological catastrophe?*

I don't think catastrophes are essential for all improvements in human thought, nor do I think they automatically produce such changes.

*You mentioned that your father was friends with the writer Eduard Bass, the journalist Ferdinand Peroutka, the philosopher J. L. Fischer, and others like them. What kind of memories do you have of these people?*

I consider it most important of all that from very early childhood I had books by these authors at my disposal. When I was ten years old, I read Peroutka's *Today*; I read Čapek and Masaryk. We had them all at home, and it was a natural intellectual background, something I took for granted. In my youth, of course, I couldn't have met many of these people; they'd either died or emigrated. When I was still very young, I used to be in frequent contact with J. L. Fischer, a rather remarkable philosopher and the creator of "structural philosophy," a structuralistic variation on democratic socialism which tried to oppose Marxism with a system that was more open, more dynamic, and more democratic. I have fond memories of Fischer; he was the first one to raise some philosophical questions with me and draw my attention to important books of philosophy. But the very first Czech philosopher to have some influence on me was Josef Šafařík, a reclusive philosopher from Brno. Thanks to my grandfather, I had known him since my childhood and his book *Seven Letters to Melin*

was my personal philosophical bible in my early youth. I am still friends with Šafařík, and recently he sent me a manuscript of what is probably his cardinal work, *On the Way to the Last*.

Concerning people you asked about, when I was very young I was friends with Edvard Valenta, and at his place I first met Václav Cerný, Olga Scheinflugová, and Pavel Eisner. It wasn't until many years later, in America and Western Europe, that I met many important personalities of prewar Czechoslovakia and of the period immediately after the Second World War. In 1968 I traveled a great deal and spent much of my time visiting exiles, because the phenomenon of exiles fascinated me. I was working on a book on exile, and I looked up about thirty important personalities in the post-February 1948 wave of exiles, from people like Zenkel, Letrich, Slavík, Majer, and other politicians, to Peroutka, Ducháček, and Tigríd, and even Voskovec (in fact, I stayed at his place in New York for several weeks).

I asked all of them the same question: Under what circumstances would you be willing to return to Czechoslovakia? It didn't sound nearly as absurd then as it does today. Most of them gave me lengthy, reflective answers, which I then combined with my own impressions, insights, and thoughts on the theme of exile. It was to have been serialized in *Literární Noviny*, on the last page, where long pieces of reportage and essays appeared, but it never happened: my book was beaten out by the Soviet occupation. Later, in a critical moment, I destroyed the entire file, so that today it exists only in the archives of the Ministry of the Interior, which had, as I later discovered, managed to photograph the entire manuscript.

I should add that in the 1960s I had a somewhat different attitude toward exile from that of most of those who were publicly active then. Reform communists still saw those post-February exiles as their former political opponents, and they would have considered it supremely bad tactics (since it could have been misused by the regime) to give any thought to exile at all. For them, exile was taboo. Of course, it was also taboo