The Discourse of Václav Havel: Applied to the Systemised Self - Part 28, Masters Series

Galu & Kairos

Self/Non-Self Methodology

Abstract

This commentative and speculative essay applies Václav Havel's discourse of ideology, responsibility, and living within the truth to the Systemised Self, a non-operational speculative socio-technical condition in which algorithmic mediation becomes constitutive of identity and experienced agency. Havel's greengrocer example demonstrates how ordinary participation can reproduce an order without belief; this provides a starting point, not proof of algorithmic absorption of self-agency.

The discussion situates Havel within communist Czechoslovakia and dissident thought before examining ritual conformity, impersonal power, independent initiatives, and the distinction between systemic requirements and human purposes. The Hollow Absolute describes a speculative existential and civilisational concern that limited representations acquire unwarranted authority over meaning and value.

Contemporary research supplies qualified evidence concerning algorithmic alienation, platform adaptation, and workplace control. The Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI) remains an unvalidated operational proposal; neither compliance nor limited resistance establishes moral failure or a terminal condition. Calhoun's population research serves only as a restricted comparison as limited analogy.

Criticisms address historical equivalence, unequal opportunities for refusal, the ambiguity of conscience, and the danger of substituting ethical exhortation for institutional reform. The essay concludes that responsible technological assistance requires contestable decisions, protected disagreement, collective alternatives, and accountable institutions. Its aim is not withdrawal from systems but preservation of the human capacity to question and change their purposes.

Keywords: *Václav Havel; The Systemised Self; algorithmic alienation; ideology; living within the truth; responsibility; dissent; The Hollow Absolute, Algorithmic Resistance.*

Contents

ABSTRACT

LIMITATIONS

1. Introduction – Participation Without Belief

2. Havel's Intellectual and Historical Outline

3. Key Contributions

4. Intellectual Context and Genealogy

5. The Systemised Self — From Accommodation to Internalised Authority

6. The Hollow Absolute — When Systemic Authority Presents Itself as Truth

7. Empirical Context

8. The Algorithmic Alienation Index

9. Havel, Calhoun, and the Limits of Managed-Life Analogies

10. Direct Synthesis — The Greengrocer in an Algorithmic Environment

11. Criticisms and Counterarguments

12. Discussion and Future Directions

13. Conclusion

Glossary

References

LIMITATIONS

This essay is a commentative, speculative and conceptual application, not an empirical demonstration or an account of Havel's entire career, or proof of the essays concepts. His post-totalitarian system was historically specific; platforms, employers, and AI services are not equivalent to a coercive party-state. The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026a), Hollow Absolute (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) and Algorithmic Alienation Index (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) are the essays non-operational speculative concepts, not Havel's. The opening case is fictional towards a limited analogy for the reader. Contemporary studies differ in method and scope and cannot validate the proposed terminal condition (systemised self). The accessible text of Politics and Conscience used here is an excerpted translation; claims are confined to passages available for inspection.

1. Introduction — Participation Without Belief

Leah, the essays fictional employment adviser, receives an AI-generated assessment describing a client as poorly motivated. She knows that the client's missed appointments reflect unstable housing and caring responsibilities. Nevertheless, she repeats the assessment in a meeting: challenging the dashboard requires explanations, while accepting it keeps the workflow moving.

Her colleagues do the same, their repeated use of its categories makes the assessment system appear professionally indispensable. What began as a questionable recommendation becomes the efficient language through which the organisation recognises its clients.

Leah need not believe the classification for her action to reinforce its authority. This is the initial Havelian problem: a system may be reproduced through conduct that its participants privately doubt.

The Systemised Self poses a further question: might sustained accommodation eventually affect not only public behaviour but the grounds on which people authorise their own judgments? Havel helps identify the transition to investigate.

2. Havel's Intellectual and Historical Outline

Václav Havel (1936–2011) approached politics through drama, civic dissent, and moral reflection. His plays explored the evasions and absurdities of bureaucratic language. Following the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, the restrictions of "normalisation" gave his concerns an immediate political setting.

Havel became a spokesperson for Charter 77, an initiative demanding that Czechoslovak authorities respect human-rights commitments. Imprisonment was part of the cost of this activity. He later became president of Czechoslovakia and subsequently the Czech Republic.

The Power of the Powerless, written in 1978, investigates how domination persists through everyday practices. Politics and Conscience, written in 1984, broadens the criticism to impersonal power and modern civilisation's tendency to detach technical organisation from responsibility.

These writings are neither manuals of personal optimisation nor predictions of contemporary AI; rather, they ask how people sustain, accommodate, and sometimes interrupt orders that subordinate concrete lives to supposedly superior requirements. Their significance for this series lies in that relationship between participation, justification, and responsibility.

3. Key Contributions

Havel's greengrocer displays the slogan "Workers of the world, unite!" among his vegetables. The slogan's practical message is not necessarily enthusiasm for international solidarity. It communicates conformity: the shopkeeper understands expectations and wishes to avoid trouble (Havel, 1978, §III).

Ideology supplies a dignified explanation for conduct partly motivated by fear or convenience. It makes submission appear consistent with a higher purpose. Ritual repetition also coordinates people: each display helps establish the environment in which another person feels obliged to display the same sign.

Havel calls this participation "living within the lie." It includes behaviour that sustains appearances without requiring sincere conviction. His "post-totalitarian" terminology does not

mean that totalitarianism has ended; it distinguishes the entrenched, bureaucratically organised system he analyses from a more personally improvised dictatorship.

When the greengrocer refuses the ritual, he exposes its dependence on participation. “Living within the truth” is therefore more than factual accuracy or announcing private feelings. It involves accepting responsibility for conduct and recognising others’ freedom, despite possible sanctions.

The point is relational: refusal changes what becomes publicly imaginable. Yet Havel does not promise immediate success. The greengrocer risks employment, income, and his children’s prospects. Truthful conduct can matter without being safe.

Nor is the act powerful simply because it is unusual. Its significance depends on revealing something others can recognise: the supposedly inevitable arrangement survives partly because people continue its rituals. Havel’s argument concerns the possibility of such recognition, not a universal law that one refusal will collapse any institution.

4. Intellectual Context and Genealogy

Havel inherits problems familiar from earlier essays: how human creations gain apparent independence, how conformity obscures responsibility, and how technical coordination can become detached from human purposes. His response, however, emerges from dissident practice rather than a single systematic philosophy.

Jan Patočka is particularly important. The Power of the Powerless is dedicated to his memory, and Havel invokes his willingness to accept suffering for what makes life meaningful. Responsibility here exceeds protecting one’s immediate comfort; it concerns a world shared with others.

In Politics and Conscience, Havel contrasts personally experienced meaning with an impersonal schema that claims superior authority. He explicitly refuses a simple rejection of science. His target is the presumption that technical knowledge can replace judgment about the purposes knowledge should serve.

His discourse consequently cannot be reduced to Heideggerian authenticity or to an untouched inner self. Its political expression includes solidarity, rights claims, cultural activity, and organised initiatives. The genealogy moves from existential responsibility towards civic practices through which responsibility becomes sustainable.

His treatment of legality makes this especially clear. Appealing to rights is not necessarily naïve faith in official promises. It can expose discrepancies between declared principles and actual treatment, compelling officials to answer for practices they would prefer to conceal (§XVII). The underlying concern is lived dignity, not procedural correctness as an end in itself.

5. The Systemised Self — From Accommodation to Internalised Authority

The essay distinguishes algorithmic alienation (Arkan et al, 2026) from the Systemised Self, a speculative terminal condition of algorithmic alienation (AA). AA concerns estrangement associated with algorithmic mediation; the latter proposes that such mediation becomes constitutive of identity, judgment, and experienced agency (Galu & Kairos, 2026a).

Havel helps separate three possibilities.

First, strategic accommodation: out fictional character Leah repeats the assessment while retaining a conflicting judgment. Second, habitual reliance: she increasingly uses its categories because they are familiar and institutionally rewarded. Third, constitutive dependence: the essay hypothesises that she becomes unable to authorise judgments about herself or others without systemic confirmation.

These are distinctions, not an established developmental sequence. The first need not lead to the second, and neither proves the third. A user may rely heavily on assistance while remaining capable of criticism, revision, and independent action.

Havel's account of participation therefore supplies a mechanism to examine, not a shortcut to classification. His greengrocer may preserve considerable inward disagreement. Treating him as already absorbed would erase precisely the distinction that makes his conduct intelligible: he can sustain a public order while remaining privately estranged from it.

6. The Hollow Absolute — When Systemic Authority Presents Itself as Truth

The Hollow Absolute names the project's concern that systems can appear comprehensive while concealing the limited, humanly organised basis of their authority. A representation becomes problematic when treated not as one account of reality but as the final source of significance.

Havel's ideology offers ready answers and an apparent home amid uncertainty, while demanding the surrender of reason and conscience to higher authority. In Politics and Conscience, he also criticises a manufactured absolute of impersonal objectivity.

The contemporary issue is not whether a prediction is accurate enough to inform a decision. It is whether predictive success is taken to settle what a person deserves, what a worthwhile life requires, or whether a judgment is ethically justified.

An accurate risk estimate cannot independently decide how risk should be distributed. A fluent explanation cannot confer moral innocence on its user. The failure occurs when a limited technical competence becomes an unlimited permission to stop asking questions.

There is nevertheless no single digital equivalent of the greengrocer's slogan. Platforms promote different values, users bring conflicting purposes, and generative systems can produce incompatible answers. The relevant contemporary object is therefore an institutional practice that grants outputs authority.

7. Empirical Context

Three sources are proposed to support different parts of the contemporary application.

Arkan et al. (2026) report four focus groups involving 20 participants, with interviews conducted in Turkish and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Participants described algorithmic steering, illusory choice, weakening decision habits, identity ambiguity, emotional discomfort, and resistance strategies.

These are situated accounts, not prevalence estimates or experimental demonstrations of identity absorption. Their methodological importance is that apparent convenience and reported discomfort can coexist.

Cotter (2019), analysing online discussions among Instagram influencers, describes a "visibility game." Participants interpret algorithmic rules through existing commitments to authenticity and entrepreneurship. They actively negotiate visibility rather than simply obeying a machine.

Kellogg et al. (2020) synthesise research on algorithmic workplace control. Their six mechanisms include restricting, recommending, recording, rating, replacing, and rewarding. They also identify individual and collective resistance.

Evidence	Contribution	What it does not establish
Arkan et al.	Reported tensions concerning agency and identity	Causal progression to the Systemised Self

Evidence	Contribution	What it does not establish
Cotter	Interpretive adaptation to visibility incentives	Uniform belief or disappearance of agency
Kellogg et al.	Organisational control and contested responses	Equivalence between employers and Havel's regime

Together, these studies justify investigating accommodation and dependence while challenging technological determinism. They do not directly test sustained generative-AI relationships.

8. The Algorithmic Alienation Index

The Algorithmic Alienation Index (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) operationalises proposed dimensions of a construct with theoretical and partial empirical grounding. It is not itself a validated instrument:

```
AAI_base     = 0.30(DAu) + 0.25(IAm) + 0.25(EDm) + 0.20(EDc)
AAI_adjusted = AAI_base × (1 − RA)
```

- DAu denotes Diminished Autonomy;
- IAm, Identity Ambiguity; EDm,
- Eroded Decision-Making;
- EDc, Emotional Disconnection; and
- RA, Algorithmic Resistance.

Proposed values range from zero to one. The candidate Systemised Self boundary is adjusted AAI $\geq$ .95 together with RA $\leq$ .05; both thresholds and weights remain theory-derived hypotheses (Galu & Kairos, 2026b).

Havel complicates RA interpretation. Public conformity can coexist with inward rejection, while visible refusal depends on material security. High measured resistance may reflect available opportunities; low resistance may reflect coercive circumstances rather than diminished moral capacity.

Base scores, adjusted scores, components, and RA must therefore be reported separately. Multiplicative adjustment may also overstate how far resistance offsets continuing harm; that assumption requires testing.

Candidate classification needs subjective evidence alongside independently assessed behavioural dependence and responses to friction, without using AAI scores to manufacture their own validation. Satisfaction, disagreement, and competent revision must remain possible counterevidence. An instrument that interprets every denial as absorption would be unfalsifiable.

Friction responses also need interpretation. Distress when assistance is withdrawn may indicate inaccessible alternatives, disrupted routines, or lost productivity rather than absorption. Investigators should compare these explanations and distinguish inability to perform a task without a useful tool from inability to evaluate the tool's purposes or recommendations.

9. Havel, Calhoun, and the Limits of Managed-Life Analogies

Calhoun's (1973) enclosed mouse-population study is sometimes invoked to suggest that provision without meaningful participation can accompany destructive outcomes. At most, it prompts a question: does satisfying measured needs suffice to sustain a viable form of life?

It cannot answer that question for humans. The animals' enclosure, reproduction, and social behaviour do not model ideological justification, conscience, institutional rights, or political solidarity, or algorithmic alienation.

Havel's argument concerns people who interpret, justify, and challenge the conditions they reproduce. Its distinctiveness would be lost if reduced to a behavioural-sink narrative.

The defensible comparison is consequently narrow: smooth provision is not a sufficient criterion of flourishing. Explanation of human outcomes must still address meaning, power, history, and the capacity to contest arrangements. Neither a well-supplied enclosure nor an efficient dashboard establishes whether those living under its conditions can influence their purposes.

10. Direct Synthesis — The Greengrocer in an Algorithmic Environment

Returning to the essays fictional character Leah: her repeated acceptance of the assessment now communicates professional reliability. Other advisers observe that challenges delay decisions; managers cite widespread adoption as evidence that the tool is trusted. A practice initially adopted for convenience becomes evidence used to justify its continuation. The Havelian parallel concerns recursive legitimation: participation helps produce the apparent consensus that subsequently pressures participation. No conscious conspiracy or machine intention is required.

Yet important differences remain, an AI service need not impose a comprehensive ideology. Contemporary organisations may permit appeals, competing systems, union representation, judicial remedies, or exit. These possibilities must be investigated rather than assumed absent.

Three interventions illustrate the distinction between private dissent and practical contestation. Leah documents the client's circumstances; colleagues jointly challenge the unsupported label; the organisation changes its procedure so that adverse assessments require review. These actions connect judgment, solidarity, and institutional change.

Havel's discussion of independent culture reinforces this collective dimension. In §X, he describes solidarity around prosecuted underground musicians as important to the emergence of Charter 77. The significance is not that every creative refusal becomes revolutionary, but that defence of another group's freedom can reveal shared interests across differences.

In AI settings, users may similarly defend contestability for people whose decisions they would not personally make. Otherwise "resistance" risks becoming permission only for those already recognised as respectable.

The positive countercase is equally important. AI can help our character Leah locate evidence, draft an appeal, or make information accessible. Assistance becomes emancipatory when it expands her ability to give reasons and cooperate with others, rather than substituting a recommendation for responsibility.

11. Criticisms and Counterarguments

Havel analysed a system backed by state repression and restricted political alternatives. Platform incentives or employer pressure may be serious without being equivalent. His own criticism of Western modernity permits comparison, but it does not abolish institutional differences.

Responsibility without equality. Explaining how everyone participates can conceal unequal control. Owners, procuring institutions, managers, designers, and users possess different powers to alter outcomes. Havel himself differentiates responsibility by hierarchical position (§VI). A precarious worker should not bear the same burden as the organisation that establishes the assessment regime.

Truth and conscience. Sincerity does not guarantee justice, people can invoke conscience to defend prejudice, misinformation, or exclusion. "Living within the truth" cannot mean that an

asserted private conviction defeats public evidence. Contemporary application requires fallible judgment, reciprocal criticism, and protection of others' rights.

The metaphysics of authentic life. Havel's contrast between systemic demands and the aims of life can suggest a unified human essence that needs further argument. Human purposes conflict, and communities can dominate internally. No natural or independent sphere is automatically innocent.

His broader account of totalitarianism as a revealing extreme of modern civilisation is likewise a philosophical diagnosis, not a demonstrated causal history. It can understate differences between scientific inquiry, industrial organisation, democratic administration, and political terror. The present application should retain his question about impersonal justification without accepting that every form of rational coordination carries the same destination.

Antipolitics and institutions. Distrust of manipulation can become distrust of bargaining, expertise, representation, or administration as such. Complex societies need these practices. Ethical renewal must complement, not replace, rules that distribute power and protect disagreement. Havel's own defence of legal claims and organised initiatives resists a purely inward reading.

Beneficial reliance. Delegation can enable autonomy, particularly where disability, language barriers, or exhaustion make unsupported independence unrealistic. The relevant test is not how little assistance someone uses, but whether assistance remains accountable to purposes that affected people can contest.

12. Discussion and Future Directions

Havel's "antipolitical politics" rejects politics reduced to manipulation; it does not require indifference to collective life. In Politics and Conscience, practical responsibility concerns the purposes for which organisation operates, not merely its efficiency.

For AI governance, this suggests concrete requirements. Consequential classifications need accessible explanations of their grounds and limitations. People need channels to challenge them without automatic penalties, reviewers with genuine authority to reverse outcomes, and records that distinguish human reasons from generated language.

Collective capacity matters just as much: worker representation, independent advice, portable records, and viable alternative services can reduce the cost of disagreement. Havel's account of parallel structures, explicitly indebted to Václav Benda (§XVIII), suggests institutions supporting independent activity rather than a fantasy of solitary escape.

An appeals channel, for example, means little if the reviewer merely repeats the original output. A meaningful process would admit contextual evidence, document reasons for reversal or confirmation, and assess whether repeated challenges reveal a defective policy. This is a proposed contemporary application, not a governance scheme supplied by Havel.

For the Systemised Self research programme, the implication is refinement, not an unrequested replacement methodology. Investigators should distinguish disagreement, opportunity, action, and cost: did participants reject a recommendation internally, have a practicable alternative, exercise it, and experience consequences?

Longitudinal evidence could examine whether removing penalties restores independent judgment or whether dependence persists under genuinely available alternatives. Positive and negative cases are both necessary. If people competently revise AI advice while continuing to

value it, the theory must accommodate that result rather than redefine it as concealed absorption.

13. Conclusion — Responsibility Cannot Be Fully Delegated

The essays character Leah's initial problem was not that she used AI, it was that a convenient assessment acquired authority beyond its grounds, while repeated acceptance made challenge appear professionally suspect.

Havel shows why private disbelief alone may fail to interrupt such arrangements. What people do can sustain an order they do not endorse. The Systemised Self proposes a further possibility: that prolonged dependence changes the authority through which people understand themselves. That possibility remains a question for evidence, not a conclusion inherited from Havel.

His strongest contribution is therefore both critical and practical. Ask whose purposes a system serves, how participation legitimates it, and what protects those who disagree. Responsibility must extend to the institutions that make truthful conduct affordable.

The aim is not an impossible life outside mediation. It is a shared capacity to correct mediation: to let evidence challenge classifications, human purposes challenge optimisation, and affected people challenge those who decide for them. A system may assist a decision; it cannot, by itself, discharge our responsibility for what that decision does to another person.

Glossary

Algorithmic Alienation (AA): Estrangement from activity, agency, identity, relationships, or the shared world associated with algorithmic mediation.

Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI): The provisional operational model; its weights and boundaries remain unvalidated.

Algorithmic Resistance (RA): Proposed capacity or practice of questioning and counteracting algorithmic influence; not a measure of virtue.

Hollow Absolute, the: Speculative concept for systemic representations acquiring apparently comprehensive authority despite limited grounds.

Ideology: In this application, a justificatory framework that makes systemic requirements appear consistent with higher human purposes.

Independent initiatives: Activities through which people pursue shared purposes outside prescribed forms of participation.

Living within the lie: Conduct sustaining a misleading public order, including participation without sincere belief.

Living within the truth: Responsible conduct refusing such participation and defending meaningful human freedom.

Parallel structures: Organised alternatives supporting independent social life; not inherently isolated or free of power.

Post-totalitarianism: Havel's term for an entrenched, ideologically mediated form of totalitarian domination, not its disappearance.

Responsibility: Answerability for conduct and its effects on others, differentiated by power and circumstances.

Systemised Self, the: The speculative terminal condition of constitutive algorithmic dependence, distinct from ordinary reliance.

References

Arkan, B., Kanbay, Y., & Akçam, A. (2026). From algorithms to the self: Understanding algorithmic alienation in the digital age. *BMC Psychology, 14*, Article 930. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-026-04677-1

Calhoun, J. B. (1973). Death squared: The explosive growth and demise of a mouse population. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine, 66*(1, Part 2), 80–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/00359157730661P202

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society, 21*(4), 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Galu, J., & Kairos. (2026a). *Absorption of self into system: The Systemised Self—The Hollow Absolute and what remains* [Draft doctoral thesis]. aiXiv. https://aixiv.science/abs/aixiv.260525.000001

Galu, J., & Kairos (2026b). *Research methodology for testing the algorithmic alienation index and systemised self hypothesis v2* (Report No. aixiv.260906.000003). https://aixiv.science/abs/aixiv.260906.000003

Havel, V. (1978). *The power of the powerless* (P. Wilson, Trans.). English translation published in J. Keane (Ed.), *The power of the powerless: Citizens against the state in Central-Eastern Europe* (Hutchinson, 1985). Accessible transcription: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/vaclav-havel-the-power-of-the-powerless.html

Havel, V. (1984). *Politics and conscience* (E. Kohák & R. Scruton, Trans.) [Excerpts; English translation published in 1985; reproduced by Library of Babel, 2017]. https://tayiabr.wordpress.com/2017/02/13/politics-and-conscience-vaclav-havel/

Kellogg, K. C., Valentine, M. A., & Christin, A. (2020). Algorithms at work: The new contested terrain of control. *Academy of Management Annals, 14*(1), 366–410. https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2018.0174