

Individualism Rules over Both Education and the Cosmos

(A Commentary to a Primary Source – Tomáš Trnka: The Principle of the Individuality of the World)*

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Each one of the thinkers that have been mentioned so far had in one way or another worked as a pedagogue. After all, it was a custom in the interwar years for full professors to teach at gymnasiums (this is where the addressing “Mr. Professor” common in today’s gymnasiums comes from). In our case, this applies mainly to František Mareš, but Ferdinand Pelikán and Karel Vorovka had made their living by teaching in certain periods of their lives, too. That is why it can come as a surprise that none of them thought of projecting their experience with teaching into their own area of expertise and of approaching education from a philosophical perspective. This general tendency does not apply to Tomáš Trnka, however, since he devoted almost his entire life to educating the public. Moreover, he was also an idiosyncratic philosopher and as such, he formulated the grounding of what would later be called philosophy of education.

In his autobiography, Trnka speaks of two plates of a metaphorical scale, where

“on one plate there is the philosophical and philosophical-pedagogical work, and on the other, there is the motivational and organisational work in public education, both of which must complement each other, balance each other out, and thus create a unified whole.”¹

Retrospectively speaking, one cannot elude the impression that the scales of Trnka’s life have, in the end, shifted in favour of philosophy and theoretical

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1 Trnka, T., *Autobiography (Životopis)*. *Filosofický časopis*, 17, 1969, No. 4, p. 567.

work. Nevertheless, in order to fully appreciate the complexity of Trnka's personality, we must not forget his remarkable achievements in the domain of public education.

He entered the Union for Public Education (*Svaz osvětový*) in January 1917 and remained loyal to it until September 1947. As his first contribution to the Union's cause, he organized a large fundraising aimed mainly at the establishment of a public university and financial support of local public libraries, the success of which earned him the full trust of the Union's head executives. After that, he devoted himself to supporting the expansion of librarian and cinematographic activities. This eventually led to the passing of the librarian law after the War, and Trnka was appointed by the Ministry of education to establish a library expedition. During the same time, Trnka advocated for a reform of film distribution, so that representatives of art, cultural, and public educational corporations could participate in it as well, and also started a rental service of cultural and educational films in the Union and encourages their development. Around the same time, he also initiated the filming of the experimental film *A Storm over the Tatras* (*Bouře nad Tatrami*), a visual adaptation of Vítězslav Novák's symphonic poem *In the Tatras* (*V Tatrách*). The film gained significant international attention and was even awarded a prize – a cup from the Venice Biennale. Later, Trnka established regular reviewing of all domestic and foreign films screened in Czechoslovakia and designated a special insert in the magazine *Česká osvěta* (*Czech Public Education*) devoted exclusively to these reviews.

Apart from his abundant practical activity, Trnka put perhaps even more effort into his theoretical work. His initial premise was as follows:

“It was clear to me that Czech public education, if it is to continue evolving, must be given a firm philosophical and scientific-theoretical foundation, which it must find in connection to philosophy of culture, to pedagogy, psychology, and sociology.”²

In this short commentary, we shall focus mainly on Trnka's work in philosophy of culture, since he was undoubtedly one of the greatest thinkers of the time in that domain.

The core idea of his philosophy of culture is quite peculiar. Against all assumptions, Trnka considers culture as something that is dead. Although it may sound as a paradox, his thesis is deeply connected to a question he was firmly resolved to answer. This question is also present in the title of

2 Ibid.

his philosophical trilogy *Searching for the Secret of Life (Hledám tajemství života)*. Trnka can be considered one of the first Czechoslovak philosophers who approached the problem of death with all seriousness. To him, death was not simply the opposite of life; life itself always existed on the background of death and vice versa. When Trnka ponders about the meaning of life, he always ponders about the problem of death as well. He understands death as a completion of an individual life, a sort of a summary, but also as a mirror. Even though life completed by death is mute, it is also telling, it bears with it a certain message, which can be deciphered and shared only by the living. Trnka thus presents a vision of resurrecting a life completed by death in a generational sense. If life is to have any meaning, it must end with death; endless life could never have any meaning, according to Trnka, because it would essentially pour out into vast space and would never attain a solid shape. Death is thus the first precondition for a meaning of life. The final judgment on a life completed by death is, however, passed only in the moment when someone resurrects it by living according to the values which were established in that life. In this continuation, death is valued by life and it is in this valuation where Trnka sees the highest possible form of justice.

In death, life is just towards itself, since it enables its own continuation through its own valuation of itself. In the book *Man and His Work (Člověk a jeho dílo)*, Trnka formulates his thesis in the following manner:

“And above the surface of the Earth where the groups of man live and work, loosely or more tightly bound, reigns the Justice of life, an eternal silence of dying and new arriving. Man comes, stops at the Earth, and just as he spots a glimpse of its horizons and lifts his eyes up towards the skies, he departs. Only his work and his death and his offspring stand face to face. [...] Each one of these whole and unique units of the human species, taken by itself, emerges upon the surface of this world to give value to its life by living it all the way until death, and to give it a unique expression in their cultural work.”³

This is the blueprint of Trnka’s analysis of the meaning of culture. For him, culture is everything man-made, and because of that the majority of culture is comprised of something past. At the same time, cultural goods, values, and strategies are the result of the work of individuals. Only when one’s work has its continuators does it attain meaning, in which the greatness of its creator is appreciated. If one’s work is forgotten, it loses its meaning and goes

3 Trnka, T., *Man and His Work, a Philosophy of Culture (Člověk a jeho dílo, filosofie kultury)*. Praha, O. Štorch-Marien 1926, p. 179–180.

to vain. At this point, we must note that one's life work has two poles – a living and a dead one. For Trnka, dead work is everything that the individual has imprinted into matter and moulded it by doing so. By living work Trnka means one's offspring. Both remain in existence after the creator's death and, generally speaking, the creator's life attains meaning when a synthesis of both of these poles of his life work occurs – that is, if his children follow up on their ancestor's creation. It is in such synthetic ancestry that Trnka imagines the durability of culture.

At this point, we must stop for a while at the question of how Trnka interprets the notion of the individual.⁴ In accordance with his philosophy of culture and meaning of life, he refuses to understand the individual in a singularist manner, in which every individual unit “stands by itself”, so to speak. In order for a life of an individual to have meaning, an evaluation of its justness must take place, but this evaluation can only be done by someone else. No individual, be it human or any other, can give meaning to themselves on their own. However, man, according to Trnka, differs from plants and animals in that he is permanently subjected to an evaluation of justness, since he is in the process of creating a life work to which other people can relate themselves. If this relationship is established, the meaning of the individual, who has offered themselves through their work to this relationship, is thus sanctified. For Trnka, this settlement of justice is constantly occurring in the whole cosmos. Man has, nevertheless, the privilege of being able to assume a stance towards it. The process of making oneself capable of continuing the work of human culture is, for Trnka – education.

In order for us to have a better view of what education can and must offer, Trnka differentiates – in accordance with contemporary teachings – certain types and characters of people. Each person has a particular talent through which they differ from others. Once again, death plays an important role in this differentiation, since a typical or characteristic trait can only be highlighted when the rest of the features is deadened. It is life, however, which assumes control of the structure of the potential deadening – here, life means the development of one's own type or character. Of course, many people can miss their true calling in this situation. That is why it is precisely here where Trnka finds the correct definition of untruth. In contrast, truth, for him, is the concord of talent and life work. Education is then supposed to help find the intersection of both. However, it is, as we see, a life-long endeavour.

Its success or failure can only be evaluated by death, which for Trnka means: evaluated by the next generation which finds a model of its own life

4 A closer look at this problem is offered in the below-mentioned excerpt.

in the previous life finished by death. A just assessment of an individual's life comes from the future, which the individual alone can only offer their work to. The more differentiated and more specific one's character is, the more meaningful his life is.

Hopefully, this short commentary will help you, the reader, in understanding the excerpt included below. It is taken from the book *Man and World* (*Člověk a svět*).

The Principle of the Individuality of the World

Tomáš Trnka

Organic nature appears to the common man at first sight as a great summary of individual beings living independently from one another, living and experiencing their own lives only. From here stems the popular individualist view that humanity is composed of individual people. This is not, however, an individualist view, but in fact a *singularist* one: it separates and leaves alone every single person and animal and treats them as single units; and then it arrives at the whole of nature by adding up all these units. From this straightforward, simple-minded view stem also the principles of equal rights for all, the Christian straightforward teaching about brotherhood and sisterhood. Even some social reformers base their programmes on this singularist conception of human society. Finally, even philosophers dwell shallowly on this unit-counting view, which attains a dangerous form if it is presented, on the one hand, as a noetic-subjectivist consequence (as in Berkeley, Hume, solipsism), or, on the other hand, as an aristocratic, individualistic consequence in the ethical sense, purporting absolute wilfulness of the individual and extrication from all moral responsibility (as in, for example, Max Stirner).

Theory of knowledge also attains a wholly similar form, on the one side, in the doctrine of individual knowledge, corrected by other people's knowledge. Truth, then, is the agreement of all, a collective vote. On the other side, there is a belief in the individual's absolute intuition.

In short, this singularist view serves as an important foundation for various types of thought. If it is then used as an uncritical foundation for seri-

* Trnka, T, *Man and World* (*Člověk a svět*), Praha: Aventinum, 1929, p. 57–65.

ous cultural, social and national economic thinking, it becomes dangerous due to its consequences, either to the benefit of herd-like unit-counting, or demagogic and mystic appropriation of rights and faith in oneself, i.e. in the individual (egotism).

In his book *Was ist Individualismus* (1913), G. E. Burckhardt differentiates several types of individualism, according to the domain of thought in which the thesis about the individual human being is applied: the individual – a unit in the state regime; the individual in civic life; the individual – the artist's being; the individual – the subject in psychology; the individual in biology (the biological problem of individuality); the individual in noetics (personalism); the individual in history (Carlyle). But we could go on to extend this list with even more domains of human thought.

What is interesting is the far-reaching, but completely distorted meaning that language as a means of communication attains in the service of this singularistic individualism. And even in general, this view, that lacks any organic mastic with which to paste together singular individuals into a whole of humanity and nature, distorts the many, many expressions and elemental capabilities or functions of the human into artificial, mediating bridges between isolated individuals. Creative projects that are brimming with life are thus turned into schemata, into straps by which people bind themselves to one another. State laws, legal norms and so on and so forth become templates for binding, instead of expressions of a living spirit. Or, conversely, they become a mystical subjectivist illusion (an analogy to intuition): the individual withdrawing into himself, into his mind.

These completely one-sided biases or even dangers of singularistic individualism have given rise to two opposing worldviews: *energetic materialism* and *spiritualistic vitalism*. *Singularistic individualism* is, in fact, a naïve *pluralism*: it is a faith in a certain number of independent individuals and objects existing in the world. In contrast to that, the two opposing views represent a faith in a *unity of the world*, in a single foundation of the world: *monism*.

Both these worldviews seek the underlying reality behind individuals and objects, they seek the tape which forms and binds together the whole world. Energetic materialism considers matter and energy to be this tape. Everything in the world is conjoined into an indivisible whole, into a sea of creative matter. Although matter is of an atomistic-quantitative composition, it nevertheless houses a creative principle symbolized either by the laws of the mechanistic, deterministic flow of events and changes of matter, or by the cohesive force that holds particles together, so that none of the total sum of energy is lost, or it is symbolized by the creative movement with which matter is endowed. No materialism is thoroughly pluralistic-atomistic and quantitative. From the viewpoint of energetic materialism, all events in the world happen

according to the Spencerian principle of composition and decomposition. All individual beings and objects in the world are merely space-time constructs that have come into existence, that endure, and that will eventually decompose. The whole world is nothing else than this constant change, the constant creation of new and new forms. Perhaps there is a certain development and sense in this constant flow of events. But this development and sense is determined only to the sense of the existence of energy and matter. This energetic materialism culminates in the doctrine of the cosmic flow of events, of emergence and disappearance of cosmic worlds, and of stellar constellations.

The second monistic worldview is *spiritualistic vitalism*. It emerged from the dissatisfaction caused by the materialistic implication that human lives could potentially be nothing more than changes in matter, utilization of material energy, and that the highest moral principle could be simply to use energy as best and most economically as possible. Vitalism believes in creative spiritual life, in a cosmic spirit which manifests itself most evidently in the creative flow of life which maternally, parentally binds the entire organic world into one great family, and which also creates matter – its own opposite, as nourishment for its creation. Humanity stands at the top of this family of the organic world and the absolute spirit hidden within it creates as its best expression love and maternity on the one hand, and cultural property on the other. Life is a current which differentiates itself into individualities. Individual beings are waves on the surface of this current. According to this ancient view, there are, in fact, no individuals, no singular independent beings, not even independent human beings. The creative current of life as a whole is carried along by the desire to create an independent individual human being, which would be the fully rounded, enclosed, perfect, and finished image of God. It, however, manages to create only a tendency, a swirling whirl, a rising wave: thus, the individual beings emerge as mortal; only the current of life as a whole is immortal.

Both these views are postulates, theses; they are unprovable. And I would like to state that they are incorrect, as well. Incorrect, because both, as opposing views that emerged from the same reaction and from the same cause, disprove each other. One cannot explain life from matter, the other cannot explain matter from life, or spirit. And they both dwell upon the monistic idol, the unity of the world, and offer no explanation of its relationship to individualities, i.e. why and how that unity splits up and differentiates itself into individualities.

If we contemplate both of these worldviews, we see that energetic materialism tends to look for the solution to the riddle of the world not in nature as a whole, but rather in the atom, the electron, and such (dynamical-atomistic monism). Conversely, vitalism tends to *seek the solution in the indivisibility of*

the world as a whole, i.e. in the current of life as a whole. Both views, being two different reactions to singularistic individualism, thus find themselves on the opposite side of this view which caused them to appear and fail to apprehend the very foundation of individuality. And both these tendencies, the macroscopic and the microscopic, are incorrect since they do not, in fact, understand the substance of the world.

Let us set aside the world of the infinitely small, and the world of the infinitely large, and let us consider, for example, the lives of individual people and of humanity in the context of the organic realm. If we take individual beings as our point of departure, we must ask *what the connection between them is*, how they make up a whole. And so, we observe the bonding between man and woman, the creation of family, lineage, tribe, nation, race, humanity. It seems to us almost too evident that, *starting with the family, the progressively larger human wholes are not merely random conglomerations of individuals. It is similarly so with humanity as a species, in contrast to all other organic species.* Natural science speaks here of *evolution and differentiation*. No matter whether life on Earth emerged in a single place, or in several places at once, a typical characteristic of life from the very beginning was what we call *creative individual differentiation. Individual differentiation is a typical characteristic of life in the sense that life is delimited by birth and death. The thesis of eternal life is a fiction. There is no eternal life. Life is life only in the sense that it is born and that it dies.* If we consider the whole sum of life on Earth and we believe that somewhere else in the cosmos there also was, is, and will be life, it means that life on every dead planet, on every earth, dies just as naturally as it emerges from it. I believe it is indisputable that *eternal undifferentiated life does not exist anywhere*, and that, on the contrary, *life is life only insofar as it differentiates itself individually, and that this differentiation is enabled by being born and dying. The whole world of life is permeated, blessed by the principle of individuality.* Let us disregard history, the evolution of the organic world, and consider how not only individual beings, but all species and genera, as they have lived or presently live their unique individual lives, have emerged, continue to emerge, and are going to be emerging in the future, and, at the same time, how they have died, are dying, and are going to continue dying in the future. Living and dying permeates, blesses, gives value to all life: living and dying – that is the principle of creative individual differentiation. Everything in the world is created individually. Only naïve singularistic individualism is so narrow-minded in its assumption that individuals are just singular beings. If this was the case, the world would break down into singular beings and objects and nothing could ever glue it back together, not even the miraculous vitalistic life force, not even the miraculous cohesive force of matter. Life is life in that it differentiates itself individually. And there lies

the root of the paradoxical mystery of reality; that it is not a simple reality, a being, a duration; nor is it of a static or dynamic nature.

The common notion is that it is life which creates itself individually, but that this principle does not apply to the *inorganic* world. I would like to correct this notion, too. Let us not speak anymore of individuality then and let us speak instead of *creative synthetic differentiation*. *Everything in the world and in the cosmos differentiates itself creatively and synthetically*, it attains form by developing boundaries, by delineating itself, by fulfilling itself through emergence and death. From this point of view, *the dualism of matter and life disappears and re-emerges only as differentiation*. Even planets in the cosmos then re-emerge as synthetic wholes, the basis of which is such that it differentiates itself into matter and life. We therefore cannot speak of eternal life or abiogenesis.

The essence of the world is thus created according to the principle of self-creation, but more importantly, the essence is ethical in nature, it appears – stated in anthropomorphic terms – as justice towards oneself. *God appears to me not as the director of the world, a ruler and master, but rather as a judge of himself, as a self-revaluating principle: that is how his creative synthetic differentiation of the world emerges, a differentiation which is, however, not a purpose for itself, but which differentiates, reevaluates itself in its search for expression, or form, into which it etches, renders its existential meaning. From the human point of view, the peak of this synthetic differentiation is achieved in the individual differentiation of humanity: humanity creates self-differentiating individual wholes, which seek and find the meaning of their existence in their life and cultural works.*

Nowhere in the world, not even in the cosmos, is there a non-differentiated reservoir of substance, of life. Everything is formed in creative synthetic differentiation.

If we limit our view only to the organic kingdom on our Earth, overlooking its history, we must acknowledge this fact. Everything differentiates *itself* individually; it lives, experiences, forms an expression and a meaning to its life, and dies. There is no eternal life and no eternal undifferentiated matter. *Thus, the opposition between monism, pantheism, and pluralism disappears*. Everything is differentiated and *everything is absolute, not in its existence, but in its self-valuing, self-discovering, in projecting the meaning of its existence into its life work*. Since its inception, humanity has been this individual differentiating whole in its relation to other organic individual wholes or species, and will continue to be so until its extinction, all the while finding and embodying the meaning of its life in its human work. Analogically, every human whole also differentiates itself, delimits its life according to this principle of individuality: races, racial wholes, national wholes, the na-

tion, the tribe, the lineage, the family, and each individual, too. All life attains form in accordance with the principle of individualising differentiation.

I would like to present and show you now the whole world as organised into such individual or synthetic differentiation. But that is impossible, or at least immensely difficult. I shall say at least that it would be a mistake to think that there is more individuality in humanity as a whole than in a single person, and vice versa; it would also be mistake to speak of parts and a whole.

Individuality is the uniqueness of life; uniqueness and, at the same time, indivisibility, wholeness, oneness. We must not, however, understand uniqueness and oneness as insularity.

The old monadism that aimed at capturing the world in dynamical terms is incorrect in the same respect in which spiritualistic vitalism is incorrect: in that it projects features of the absolute into *small* individuals, that it depicts the microcosm as an *image* of the macrocosm, that it paints the human as the image of God, that it postulates individualities as reflections of the absolute. A more correct path could possibly be trodden by dynamical atomism which states that the constellation of atoms is a small version of the solar system, of the cosmic system. Although Monadism may be trying to get a correct understanding of the world in dynamical terms, nevertheless, it understands the world only from the outside. Let us, in contrast, try to understand the whole world from the inside. If the subject of my inquiry is an individual, I must understand him from the inside as an absolute value of individual life and his relationship to the world is a relationship of upward growth. If the subject of my inquiry is the whole humanity and its relationship to the individual, I am assuming the perspective of the heart of life of humanity and this relationship is a relationship of inward growth.

The principle of the individuality of the world is, in short, synthetic differentiation, *self-regulation, self-demarcation into boundaries of the forms of one's own life*, it is, therefore, growth, living, and dying from the inside. Individuality, synthetic differentiation is thus, on the one hand, a kind of enclosure into the confines of form, it is a process of becoming independent, and, on the other hand, a process of experiencing of one's own unique life, solely one's own. Here already you can see the ethical, supra-ethical character of all natural events: unique living at the cost of regulation and dying. We, therefore, cannot speak of any kind of absolute or any relativeness in the world.

Everything in the world is individually, synthetically differentially formed: everything grows from the inside and that precisely is living and dying, duration and cessation of existence. To understand the world means to understand this principle of individuality. *This principle of individuality as yet says nothing about the essence and meaning of the world. It is, however, a path leading us to this meaning, bringing us closer to it.*