

# Individualism in Karel Vorovka's *Scepsis and Gnosis*

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Karel Vorovka (1879–1929), a Czech mathematician and philosopher, was one of the central figures of the young generation of Czechoslovak philosophers that arose in the 1920s, and a co-founder of the philosophical journal *Ruch filosofický*. His character as a thinker could be likened to a “philosophising mathematician” who initially only dealt with questions of exact science, but gradually transferred to metaphysics and religion. One of the main “driving forces” behind this intellectual transformation was apparently his opposition to the positivism of František Krejčí, a then-dominant philosophical paradigm and celebrity of Czechoslovak academia. Krejčí’s positivism was a strictly scientific, materialistic philosophy, which, however, postulated the existence of certain transcendent aspects of reality, such as a “first cause”, i.e. that to which religion ascribes the name “God”, but denied man the capability of attaining knowledge of these aspects of reality (as opposed to, for instance, the positivisms of Ernst Haeckel or Wilhelm Ostwald, which deny transcendence altogether – Krejčí was not as “radical” in this sense as they were). Thus, religion is impossible in positivism, but Krejčí was adamant that his version of positivism sufficiently supplants religion, because it also had its own God, which was nothing other than the unknowable Transcendent. The assumption of a first cause is, according to Krejčí, a necessary requirement and, at the same time, a consequence of a truly scientific method – science, however, merely states the impossibility of attaining knowledge of this first cause. As Krejčí writes:

“... science also has its own god, which, however, differs from God and other gods of various religions in that it is unknowable.”<sup>1</sup>

This conclusion was unacceptable for Vorovka, though.

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1 Krejčí, F., *Philosophy in the Last Pre-War Years (Filosofie posledních let před válkou)*. Praha, Jan Laichter 1918, p. 59.

The agnostic position that Krejčí assumes in his stance means that God is a mere “assumption” whose existence is based on a certain degree of probability – it is a god who is “merely possible”. If one retains this positivistic view, one has simply *no way* of finding out, whether this assumption is true or not. According to Vorovka, this type of god is but a caricature of the religious god, since it completely lacks any effect on human action. It is a mere logical assumption, which has no way of stimulating the heart of man, and thus fails to motivate moral action.<sup>2</sup> For the idea of God to be effective, it has to evoke emotions in man, it needs to have psychological power. And in order for it to have this power, one has to *believe* in it, which is in itself an *irrational* exercise of spirit – one has to overcome rational scepticism, uncertainty, and the pure probability of knowledge, and make an emotional act of faith, thus making an existential turn and identifying oneself with the idea of God once and for all. Positivism does not allow for this existential turn and, for this reason, Vorovka condemns it by saying that

“there is a dangerous slope leading from positivism all the way to the depths of agnosticism and austerity”.<sup>3</sup>

If one feels a growing metaphysical need, positivism merely acts like a cage. It is evident from his writings that Vorovka felt this need and perhaps it was his experience with the limitations of the scientific view of the world which forced him to write a remarkable work such as *Scepticism and Gnosis: A Philosophical Confession* (*Skepsis a gnóse: Vyznání filosofické*).

In this very personal work, Vorovka attempts to find his own philosophical and religious conviction. He eventually finds it in a position that he describes as a theistic panpsychism, i.e. the world is the work of a divine Spirit, which is the embodiment of the highest values of Good, Truth, and Beauty, and which pervades and surrounds all reality including individual consciousnesses and the physical world.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this study, however, is not on Vorovka’s theistic panpsychism, but rather his concept of conviction in itself. As the argumentation of the study shows, this concept is the greatest and most prominent individualistic aspect of Vorovka’s thinking. It is precisely in the concept of conviction (which, in Vorovka’s eyes, has all the characteristics of a ‘living faith’ – faith built in the core of one’s individuality, not simply absorbed from the outside) that he finds a way of overcoming scepticism and determining his identity as a man, philosopher, and scientist once and

2 Vorovka, K., *Scepticism and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession (Skepsis a gnóse. Vyznání filosofické)*. Praha, Dybbuk 2017, p. 26.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

for all. The concept of 'conviction' therefore represents a path to individual, autonomous self-determination, and a way through which an individual can differentiate himself from the rest of the world and freely determine who he is for himself.

This concept assumes the utmost importance in Vorovka's thinking. Although he never explicitly states why, Vorovka is adamant in maintaining that there comes a day when every philosopher must overcome scepticism and firmly decide to believe in something – that a philosopher cannot remain a neutral, disinterested critic forever (as is the norm in today's world, for example). A philosopher must eventually make their 'act of conviction', their philosophical choice, as authentically as possible, meaning that the choice must be in line with who the philosopher is, which requires a certain degree of self-knowledge.

A second problem to be examined is the concept of *gnosis*, which comprises Vorovka's determination to continuously *attempt* to attain knowledge by both rational *and* irrational means (for example, by intuition, introspection, or empathising with others). Vorovka uses the concept of *gnosis* to explain *how* a philosopher can break through *scepsis* and start forming their own conviction. The goal of this study is to portray Karel Vorovka as a thoroughly individualistic thinker for whom the ancient mottos "know thyself!" and "think for thyself!" are imperatives of the highest importance, and also to point out some aspects in which Vorovka differs from 'radical individualism', as described by Masaryk in his *Humanistic Ideals (Ideály humanitní)*.<sup>5</sup>

## The Concept of Conviction

As we have already stated above, Vorovka understands conviction as *faith* or, more precisely, as a set of many separate *acts of faith*, through which a philosopher freely decides to identify himself with a given thought, and through which he begins to determine his own identity. Unlike faith, conviction is fundamentally active, exerting an influence on action, too.<sup>6</sup> Vorovka defines conviction as

"...a lasting determination to actuate all of the consequences of that in which we believe, to seek out all reasons for and pillars of our faith, to identify one's faith with one's thought."<sup>7</sup>

5 E.g. "Stirner proclaims: No, I am god. The pantheistic god of Hegel is transformed by Stirner into an individualistic god. And the core and meaning of all radical individualism is: that I am god." Masaryk, T. G., *Humanistic Ideals (Ideály humanitní)*. Praha, Domov 1919, p. 22.

6 Vorovka, K., *Scepsis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 33.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 33–34.

He cites Masaryk<sup>8</sup> as the most perfect example of a person who took great care to ensure that philosophy would always be a conviction and not merely “irresponsible academic theorising”. He also cites Emanuel Rádl, who, in his view, realised this demand the most clearly, also publicly proclaiming this on many occasions.<sup>9</sup>

For Vorovka, conviction does not mean a mere acceptance of a given stance, but rather a faith in it, accompanied by a certain *enthusiasm*. As is the case with faith in God, conviction too is no rational enterprise, since it entails a very significant emotional, *irrational* element. For a person to be convinced of something, they must not be content to settle on a compromise or a simple acknowledgement of probability, which is where rational reflection always inevitably leads, according to Vorovka.<sup>10</sup> Vorovka illustrates the nature of conviction in the following manner:

“Our faith, the strength of our conviction as a subjective mental state is something different from a calculated and constructed probability. The degree of convincedness is like the intensity of sensual perception: there is a threshold to it below which it is imperceptible. Just as a stimulus must attain a certain intensity for us to perceive it, so must probabilities rise sufficiently above zero for us to take them into account. Probability – that is a number pointing the way towards perfect objectivity; conviction – that is a subjective reaction, an action gushing from the individual personality and an ethical act in itself!”<sup>11</sup>

By categorising conviction as an *ethical act*, Vorovka shows that he understands it as an act of *self-determination*, which is (in an ideal case) autonomous and authentic, since Vorovka maintains that conviction must be a product of the philosopher’s own personality and not merely adopted from external influences (for example, from political parties, churches, or through uncritical acceptance of science).<sup>12</sup> Vorovka applies this imperative not only to himself, but to every person with the ambition of calling themselves a philosopher, and possibly to every person in the world as well. As Ferdinand Pelikán, Vorovka’s philosophical colleague and a fellow co-founder of *Ruch filozofický*,

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8 For a study on Vorovka’s relationship to Masaryk and his philosophical thinking see Pavlincová, H., Vorovka and Masaryk. In: Šmajš, J. (ed.), *The Bratislava Lectures (Bratislavské přednášky)*. Brno, Masarykova univerzita 2002, p. 52–61.

9 Vorovka, K., *Sceptis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 35.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

writes in the posthumously published *Collection of Texts by Karel Vorovka* (*Vorovkův sborník*):<sup>13</sup>

“Each person must first slowly and painfully fight their way towards their conviction, everyone is compelled to build their own ‘truth’ through a series of theoretical acts, and to make this truth inalienable, unlosable, and inseparable from their personality! This Fichtean intransigence, this individualistic demand for ‘faithfulness towards oneself’ never abandoned Vorovka; it was evident in his every action...”<sup>14</sup>

Vorovka observed with disappointment that, for the vast majority of people, conviction is not a result of individual intellectual labour, but rather something that “penetrates the soul from the outside until it permeates it and transforms it altogether, until the soul limits its own thinking just to the degree that it is still subordinated to thinking as a whole”<sup>15</sup> Vorovka is deeply disturbed by this widespread, casual resignation of intellectual autonomy, as he perceives the inner freedom of every person to be “the most precious estate not just of every person, but of every nation and humanity as a whole”.<sup>16</sup> A philosopher must embody the ideal of this inner freedom – he or she must be the epitome of an independent thinker, a warrior against all intellectual orthodoxy, an individualist, for whom the imperative of “faithfulness towards oneself” is of the highest importance, and who, precisely because of that, cannot do otherwise than to incessantly try to find and to confess his or her authentic conviction. This, according to Vorovka, is what differentiates a philosopher from other people, who usually “belong to a fairly specific political or religious faith and are thus almost mechanically directed in all questions of both the ordinary and the eternal”.<sup>17</sup>

On a side note, this point attracted criticism after the publication of *Scepsis and Gnosis* – criticism coming mainly from Emanuel Rádl,<sup>18</sup> who accused Vorovka of being apolitical (or more specifically of supporting “neither the Clericals, nor the Young Czechs, nor the Communists”).<sup>19</sup> While it is true that

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13 Pelikán, F., *Collection of Texts by Karel Vorovka. Dedicated to the Memory of a Czech Metaphysician* (*Vorovkův sborník. Na paměť českého metafyzika*). Praha, ČGU 1937.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

15 Vorovka, K., *Scepsis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 35.

16 Vorovka, K., *Science and Philosophy* (*Věda a filosofie*). *Ruch filosofický*, 1, 1920, No. 1, p. 10.

17 Vorovka, K., *Scepsis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 7.

18 Rádl, E., *Czech Pre-War and Post-War Philosophy III*. *Čas*, 31, 1921, No. 111, 13. 5., p. 4. Cf. *Of Our Contemporary Philosophy* (*O naší nynější filosofii*). Praha, Stanislav Minařík 1922, p. 14.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Vorovka did not engage actively in contemporary politics, politics, but he did express his express his political views in *Scepsis and Gnosis* (although somewhat briefly). In answer to the question of what the ideal political organisation would be, he names a federation of nations based on a principle of cosmopolitan citizenship.<sup>20</sup> There is no future in the hegemony of one nation above another, according to Vorovka. Following the example of Masaryk, Vorovka maintains that a nation is a necessary step on humanity's path, however, it is a step that must eventually be overcome as a means of progressing towards the ideal of a panhuman brotherhood. Perhaps the most concrete formulation of Vorovka's political stance can be found in Pelikán's remark that Vorovka was "a determined *individualist* and *liberal* and remained them until the end of his life."<sup>21</sup> In *Scepsis and Gnosis*, Vorovka also denounces the Russian Revolution, socialism, bolshevism, and Marxist materialism.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Vorovka never became a member of any political party, since that would most likely mean submitting to a collective opinion, therefore discrediting his individual freedom of thought. This emphasis on the individual's intellectual autonomy and disdain for all "collective faiths" – a term which Vorovka applied both to churches and political parties alike (he himself called them "little political churches")<sup>23</sup> – is undoubtedly the most evident feature of Vorovka's individualism. In one passage of *Scepsis and Gnosis*, he even goes as far as to claim that:

"Theoretically, it would be the most desirable that all faiths, except the faith in the brotherhood of all humanity, disappeared, and that all collective faiths were supplanted with individual ones."<sup>24</sup>

According to Vorovka, such collective faiths inherently pose the danger of large-scale conflicts, which can result in huge leaps, either forwards or backwards, for the whole of humanity. Their primary function is to increase society's stability, but they do it to an excessive degree, up to the point where society becomes too rigid and unable to undergo reform in a non-violent manner.<sup>25</sup> A society without collective faiths would be much more accessible

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20 Vorovka, K., *Scepsis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 182.

21 Pelikán, F., *Collection of Texts by Karel Vorovka. Dedicated to the Memory of a Czech Metaphysician*, p. 1.

22 Vorovka, K., *Scepsis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 209.

23 Vorovka, K., For a New Czech Philosophy III (O novou českou filosofii III). *Národní listy (Vzdělávací příloha)*, 61, 1921, No. 291, 23. 10., p. 1. Cf. Vorovka, K., *Polemos. The Disputes of the Czech Philosophy in 1919–1925 (Polemos. Spory v české filosofii v letech 1919–1925)*. Praha, Sfinx 1926, p. 19.

24 Vorovka, K., *Scepsis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 36.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

to reform and also much more resistant to large-scale conflicts, since “a conflict of one whole against another would be impossible, as there would be only one whole – humanity”.<sup>26</sup> The only “collective faith” that Vorovka is willing to support is the faith in the brotherhood of the whole humanity.

Let us now progress and focus on the second concept that is the focus of this study – the concept of *gnosis*. As the name of Vorovka's principal work already suggests, *gnosis* cannot be considered separately from its opposite, *scepsis*. We are thus going to have to take them into account together to show how they relate to the concepts of conviction and individualism.

### Scepsis and Gnosis

As we have already stated, for Vorovka conviction means primarily an overcoming of *scepsis*. That does not mean, however, that Vorovka simply “denies” *scepsis* altogether. *Scepsis*, or philosophical doubt, he claims, has its proper place in certain types of philosophy, particularly in the scientifically oriented type, but it does not “suit” the type of philosophy that aims at the formation of conviction, since it actually works counter to this aim. In its most radical form, scepticism can become such a sophisticated analysis of our epistemological apparatus that it slides into agnosticism – the philosophical position that knowledge is impossible. Paradoxically enough, it is precisely in this position that Vorovka finds a way of overcoming *scepsis* for good. When radical *scepsis* is experienced in its most extreme form, it ultimately leads the philosopher to a choice between two epistemological extremes: either affirmation of agnosticism, which leads to boundless scepticism (this was the choice that, for example, Nietzsche had made, according to Vorovka), or to denial of agnosticism, which leads to an affirmation of gnosticism in the sense of a “heroic effort aimed at the expansion of the boundaries of knowledge beyond every limit, at free use of all resources that both experience and reason provide, and thus at the escalation of both empiricism and rationalism”.<sup>27</sup> In *Scepsis and Gnosis*, Vorovka ultimately decides for gnosticism and, in doing so, makes his first philosophical choice through which he begins the formation of his own conviction.

Unlike *scepsis*, conviction is thus formed through singular acts of philosophical choices, or, more precisely, through “choices that surpass the certainties of daily or scientific experience”.<sup>28</sup> Every attempt at such a choice is what Vorovka calls ‘*gnosis*’. *Gnosis* is therefore precisely what brings about

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the end of scepticism through an effort to attain faith.<sup>29</sup> In a certain sense, such faith constitutes a step into the unknown – for this reason, Vorovka often speaks about gnosis in romantic terms, comparing it to an “adventure”, a “gamble”, or a “conquistador’s mission”. Knowledge gained through gnosis can be a deep insight, otherwise unachievable by reason or sensory experience, or equally it could be a complete delusion. It is precisely this uncertain aspect of gnosis that requires the element of faith as a crutch. Gnosis is always a risky endeavour, although Vorovka firmly believes that the meaning of philosophy lies precisely here (or more correctly, the meaning of *gnostic* philosophy – the kind that Vorovka decides to endorse). In contrast to science, the goal of philosophy, according to Vorovka, is “to seek new heights of freedom for human thought through the exploration of its limits.”<sup>30</sup> Gnosis is thus an expression of an epistemological stance where even the irrational capacities of the human mind, such as intuition, introspection or empathy are equally legitimate sources of knowledge as reason and sensory experience. The only difference is that it is “a gamble”, as we mentioned above. Gnosis ultimately becomes Vorovka’s method of gaining access to the metaphysical ideals of Truth, Beauty, and Moral Good, which allegedly help him in making intuitive decisions in matters of everyday life.

There is an important individualistic aspect to gnosis in Vorovka’s understanding – it must always be preceded by *autognosis*, or an attempt at self-knowledge. For a philosopher to even be able to try and gain intuitive knowledge of the ideals of Moral Good, Truth, or Beauty, they must first be absolutely certain of their desire for this knowledge – meaning that they must, in a certain sense, already *know themselves*. If they were in contradiction with themselves, a risky endeavour such as gnosis would instantly fail, since the philosopher would quickly lose faith in themselves. This “Emersonian *self-reliance*”, as Vorovka calls it, lies at the heart of Vorovka’s individualism. If the philosopher never attempts autognosis, they will never have enough faith in themselves (or knowledge of themselves) to believe in their own gnosis. And if they do not possess this faith, they will hardly ever find their own authentic conviction. Vorovka sees Jan Hus and Giordano Bruno as embodying the ideals of autognosis: unwavering trust in one’s own authentic good will and knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

According to Vorovka, autognosis as a kind of knowledge stems from a combination of reason, experience, and mysticism. This attempt at unmediated

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29 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

knowledge of the self is described as a continuation of the divine act of creation, which “has not yet been exhausted” and still permeates all living and non-living matter and fuels their transmutations. By attempting autognosis, a person begins to participate in this incessantly creative metaphysical flux, since they cease to be determined by the external world and start to co-determine themselves and the world alike. Regardless of whether autognosis is correct or mistaken, it is always a *completion of every individual personality*, as Vorovka states.<sup>32</sup>

### Vorovka's Individualism

As the last point of this article, we shall compare Vorovka's individualism with the two types of individualism that Masaryk describes in his *Humanistic Ideals* – i.e. with mild and radical individualism. Masaryk expresses his support for mild individualism which, in contrast to radical individualism, he considers to be truly philosophical and ethical, since it aims at “the creation of certain types, characters, and personalities in society through mutual effort and love.”<sup>33</sup> I believe that here lies a possible common ground between Vorovka's and Masaryk's individualisms – Vorovka's emphasis on the formation of personal conviction seems to work precisely in favour of the creation of certain types, characters, and personalities in society. However, they differ on the manner in which these types are created. While Masaryk emphasises collective effort stemming out of love (an apparent sign of his Christian beliefs), Vorovka firmly espouses the “Emersonian *self-reliance*” mentioned above in the sense that the formation of conviction is a purely personal matter of each individual person which *must not* be influenced by any other person, since that would discredit the authenticity of such conviction. As we have already stated in the first section of this study, in order for a conviction to be truly authentic, it must be a product of the philosopher's soul – it must be created autonomously and not simply adopted from outside. Vorovka thus seems to be a somewhat more “radical” individualistic figure than Masaryk, but he nevertheless remains within the bounds of mild individualism and never crosses into radical individualism.

*Radical* individualism is a point of sharp criticism in Masaryk's *Humanistic Ideals*. This criticism had a profound influence on the reception of individualistic ideas in the interwar Czechoslovak academia and is possibly the main reason why virtually none of the philosophers gathered around the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Masaryk, T. G., *Humanistic Ideals*, p. 30–31.

*Ruch* journal ever openly associated themselves with individualism (from fear of seeming too radical), although most of them embraced individualistic ideas. The reason for this is that Masaryk identifies radical individualism with solipsism and extreme ethical egoism, naming Nietzsche and Stirner as their major proponents. Just like Masaryk, Vorovka criticises these two philosophers sharply – he calls them agnostics, who claim that the certainty of their will is the only real certainty, and that it inevitably leads them to solipsism and radical ethical egoism.<sup>34</sup> However, if Vorovka is *not* a radical individualist, then how precisely do his views differ from theirs?

Despite espousing a relatively radical subjectivism in his epistemology – “the self constitutes a metaphysical principle that all reality is derived from”<sup>35</sup> – Vorovka’s subjectivism is, nevertheless, not solipsism because it relies on the existence of reality independent of the will of the subject: “Reality is an invariant of my will, it is all that does not depend on my will, but what, precisely by this definition and its practice, enters into a relationship or a relation with myself.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, according to Vorovka, solipsism is negated by the very *first contact one has with another human being*, that is, in most cases, by the first contact with one’s own parents. Such contact with another person instantly frees one from the immanent “game of subjective states” and leads one into transcendence, precisely to the moment at which one begins to *believe* that one’s parents (meaning people other than oneself) also have their own mental life. Vorovka considers this moment “the beginning of metaphysics”, since

“Believing in spiritual realities, in superpersonal ideals of the one absolute truth, beauty, and moral good, is not in any way more metaphysical than believing in the mental life of one’s own parents.”<sup>37</sup>

This position enables Vorovka to evade ethical solipsism (egoism) and to affirm ethical realism:

“If the tenets of immanent philosophy were true, then ethical solipsism would be true as well; every person would be their own judge, and if this judge were not capable of characterising their own act, their act would thus be excluded from any moral qualification. However, we have long since discarded the notion of immanence and acknowledged

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34 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

35 Vorovka, K., *Sceptis and Gnosis. A Philosophical Confession*, p. 120–121.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

the reality of other conscious beings apart from ourselves, and so here too we shall hold on to – so to speak – to ethical realism.”<sup>38</sup>

This study can be summarised by the following statement: although Karel Vorovka is certainly a thoroughly individualistic thinker who puts a very strong emphasis on the utilisation of individual freedom of thought in the pursuit of autonomous self-determination through the formation of one's own personal conviction, he is, nevertheless, not a radical individualist, since he does not deny the existence of external reality and other consciousnesses. Vorovka is also, as described above, a gnostic who assumes the radical epistemological position that gives equal value to intuitive and rational knowledge. We have also shown that Vorovka's conception of gnosis plays a role not only in mystical attempts at knowing God, but also in practical attempts at attaining self-knowledge and empathic insights.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122. Cited according to the 2017 edition.