Political and Philosophical Individualism. A Brief Introduction to the Problem*

Jakub Chavalka
Faculty of Humanities Charles University, Prague
Jakub.Chavalka@fhs.cuni.cz

The title of this collection of texts may be taken as provisional in a positive sense. None of the thinkers who are discussed here ever explicitly proclaimed themselves to be an individualist, nor did any of them proclaim their thinking was centred on individuality. Perhaps this was a result of Masaryk's rejection of radical individualism, which, in his view, was personified in Stirner and Nietzsche. Nevertheless, Masaryk himself is a good example of where the core of the problem of individualism lies. In 1930s, a certain intellectual atmosphere gradually established itself, in which Masaryk was reproached for putting too much emphasis on the individual, while ignoring specifically social issues. Thus, it seems that the problem of individualism or individuality is itself provisional – its thematisation and solution would change over a relatively short period, always in direct relation to a given conception of intersubjectivity and its moral imperatives that transcend the individual.

Nevertheless, let us get back to Masaryk and his ambiguous view of individualism. His hesitation is best expressed in his *Social Question* (*Otázka sociální*), when he calls himself an individualist, yet is quick to add that individualism is not to be confused with egoism.[1] Elsewhere, he criticises radical individualism for tearing one away from the company of other people and the influence that others necessarily have on one, either through education or simply by engaging in discussions. Masaryk pictured an individualist as

* The text is part of the Czech Science Foundation grant project (GA ČR) *Individualism in the Czechoslovak Philosophy 1918–1948*, No. 19-14180S.

1 "The fact that I cannot see absolute antagonisms between an individual and a society does in no way imply I accept absolute collectivism; on the other hand, just because I strive for a strong conception of one's own individuality, I do not support absolute egoism, for individualism and egoism are not identical." Masaryk, T. G., *Social Question* (*Otázka sociální II*). Praha, Čin 1936, p. 226.

a man who falsely abstracts himself from such influence and, psychologically speaking, wants to be left alone. This is why, for Masaryk, an individualist is a mere Philistine who just privately indulges in daydreams about his own heroism. Stirner's case served him as the best example – Stirner, full of anarchism, was all about atavism of the state apparatus, yet he did not participate in the revolution when it broke out in 1848. A touch of reality can easily prove such an individualist guilty of being a poser. It is a merely declarative individualism which, in fact, is completely indifferent to everything but one's own self, the sole place where one retreats from the rest of the world.

Despite this interpretation of radical individualism, Masaryk did openly support individualism:

> "A normal political and social state of society cannot be realised without strong individualism, i.e. without the free initiative of individuals, which basically implies a regime that allows for development of diverse individualities, born with different physical and mental talents. Each individual's situation in society is unique, and so is his social environment; an individual knows best how to use his own potential as well as the potential of his environment according to his own judgement. If one man decides about another and has leadership over him, there is danger that the leader will fail to use the full potential of his subject appropriately. This is to be seen everywhere and also politically in all forms of government with strong centralism; and precisely communism is centralist."[2]

It is clear that Masaryk talks about an individualism that founds political freedom and serves as a prerequisite to democracy. Masaryk detests the kind of individual who cowardly crawls inside himself to hostilely peer at the whole world outside, just as much as he detests the kind who gives oneself up for something bigger than oneself. Thus, Masaryk's idea of individualism is a search for the middle ground between two extremes, subjectivism and collectivism. He is wary of both for their destructivity and uncontrollability. For him, democracy can be built only on strong individualities.

In the same year that Masaryk published his *World Revolution* (*Světová revoluce*), another sworn democrat, Ferdinand Peroutka, wrote the following lines:

> "Nothing good for humanity can come out of the suppression of individuality. A solid base for everything is to be found only in a harmo-

2 Masaryk, T. G., *World Revolution During and In the War 1914–1918* (*Světová revoluce za války a ve válce 1914–1918*). Praha, Čin 1936, p. 203.

niously developed personality. Those who ask of you to cast aside your personality are but false prophets who then demand of you, ridded of your own personality, to succumb to the laws and likings of their own personalities."[3]

Peroutka cannot be suspected of enthusiastic support for any of the excesses that were ascribed to individualism at that time. It is more than characteristic of him that the presented quotation stems, just as in Masaryk's case, from a polemic against socialism that explicitly names Lenin. There is no better way to express the sober and crystal-clear awareness of the danger posed by suppression of one's own personality.

It seems that democratic thinking was supportive of individualism. However, a glimpse into the books and philosophical journals (especially *Česká mysl* and *Ruch filosoficky*) published in 1920s and 1930s reveals a completely different situation. The individual and personality are not dealt with in a political context – on the contrary, heated discussions raged over the permissibility of linking individual creativity with science and philosophy, whether the concept of intuition secretly postulates mysticism, and whether introspection means returning back to the long-surpassed individualism of German idealism. Generally speaking, Czech philosophy was much more suspicious of the individual than anywhere else in Europe. Following Masaryk's lead, it aimed at establishing a state-forming programme,[4] yet it drew ever further away from Masaryk's emphasis on a strong and high-principled individuality. For a long time, Czech philosophy maintained the tendency of objective retreat from reality and was not ready to realise that it is precisely this approach that distances it from the life of the particular man whose future it wanted to plan. The moment anyone tried to get closer to this particularity/man and contemplate it/him in its/his uniqueness, one was immediately rejected and proclaimed to be an adherent of theosophy, spiritualism or a dilettante wishing to lose himself in the world process. It was only after a long dispute that the two sides slowly started to balance out.

All of this makes it very difficult to give a short summary of what individualism in Czechoslovak interwar period was. The goal of this special issue is to

3 Peroutka, F., *The Struggles for Today* (*Boje o dnešek*). Praha, Fr. Borový 1925, p. 22.

4 "This was attempted by our revivalists […] which is why they based their national programme from the very beginning on the philosophy of history and philosophy. In philosophy they found the mirror that both our past and future seems to be to us. Philosophy connects us to the best of efforts of all nations, yet it also teaches us that the goal of our best national efforts was the same goal of all nations. Philosophy offers us as a sense of our national life: the humanist ideal, it offers us this ideal as our own, Czech ideal." Masaryk, T. G., *Our Contemporary Crisis* (*Naše nynější krize*). Praha, Ústav T. G. Masaryka (The Massaryk Institute) 2000, p. 180.

examine how the question of individualism was reflected upon and what life stances it led to in the thinking of various and, admittedly, lesser-known philosophers of the time. A reason behind this minimal familiarity with most of these thinkers lies principally in the fact that they did not originally determine the concept of man on the basis of his social relations[5] (in all possible senses), but based on man's relation and access to that which we could call "Transcendence". A human being, for them, is not grasped in its entirety if described only in terms of experience, i.e. embedded in reality, with everything one needs to live, know and act given by and through experience. For these philosophers, a human being is founded far deeper, it can even be said that a human being creates reality and is autonomous to it. What all of the presented thinkers have in common is their approach towards this autonomy of the human being or the person and their contemplation over consequences that such autonomy brings with it.

Naturally, the ways how these philosophers came to terms with these demands on thinking and actions to which it leads, i.e. intersubjectivity, differ greatly. It would be incorrect to say that those thinkers represented some united philosophical movement; after all, that was not the point of their endeavour. Nevertheless, since they loosely congregated around the journal *Ruch filosofický*, they were perceived by the public and especially by their opponents as a "generation", a generation revolting against dogmatic identification of philosophy and science, and so against Masarykean realism. This is the source of the key objections against them: that they neglect science and ignore Masaryk. The following papers show how these allegations were dealt with. The efforts to determine and delimit human autonomy and the struggle against positivist-realist diffusion of the limits of free individuality – in its metaphysical, noetic and political meaning – soon afterwards turned into a struggle for freedom of Czechoslovak philosophy, or, as Alfréd Fuchs put it, a struggle for the freedom of philosophical criticism.

The close connectedness of this struggle with the struggle of the newly formed republic for self-determination is more than evident. All the presented philosophers significantly influenced the cultural, spiritual and intellectual atmosphere of the new republic. After all, some of them understand nation or state as a sovereign individual, albeit collectively shared. The provisionality of the title of this collection of texts will be fulfilled, or perhaps surpassed, if the presented papers help to better understand how the problem of individuality formed our history.

* * *

5 This is why in 1948 they were erased from the history upon the impulse from the Marxist-Leninist historians.

Let me write a few words to the thematic composition of the individual papers. The first three articles are focused on historical context and examine the conditions of possibility of the birth of the philosophy of individualism in Czechoslovakia. Already at the beginning of the century, František Mareš, a physician and physiologist, introduced a "Kantian alternative" into Czechoslovak thinking and used it to criticise the positivism of František Krejčí. He was later dubbed the mentor of the "younger philosophical generation" whose thinking lies at the core of this whole publication. Mareš's thoughts on character and personality, although drawing heavily from physiology, did not exclude a synthesis in a spiritually understood "self", and gradually inclined more and more towards Schopenhauer's concept of innateness. For Mareš, the key principle of individuality is feeling, which, in the end, must be extended into a universal consciousness of a moral being. František Mareš is dealt with also in the second paper, which focuses on Henri Bergson, the significant influence of his thinking and the reception of his concept of intuition in Czechoslovak philosophy. Although Bergsonism was received critically, for instance by Tomáš Trnka, it did have an implicit, positive or negative influence on every philosopher of the time. This is evidenced by the third contextual paper, as Emanuel Rádl did not criticise only Bergson, but also the entire "younger philosophical generation". Rádl was a typical opponent of the philosophy of individualism, as he was personally very close to its adherents due to his being a Chairman of *Jednota Filosofická* that all the younger philosophers were gathered around. Moreover, Rádl published a book full of explicit criticism and later on, through *Jednota filosofická*, led a dispute which initiated the aforementioned struggle for the freedom of Czechoslovak philosophy.

The second thematic part of this publication is dedicated to the cardinal representatives of "the younger philosophical generation" loosely gathered around the journal *Ruch filosofický*. The paper on Ferdinand Pelikán, its founder and a long-time editor, focuses on his conception of personality, which was supposed to offer a cure to fictionalism, as introduced into modern philosophy by Hume and Kant. In this respect, Pelikán's individualism is more akin to personalism, yet, when he turns to the concepts of intuition, pluralism or imagination, building on Bergson whose crucial book *The Creative Evolution* he translated, Pelikán explicitly speaks of the birth of a new individuality. Karel Vorovka, the second long-time editor of *Ruch filosofický*, is the key figure of the following paper which interprets his philosophical confession in *Scepsis and Gnosis* (*Skepse a gnóse*). Vorovka's understanding of individualism was highly specific, tending towards the possibility of a harmonious interconnectedness of an individual with the whole cosmos, or, better yet, towards a perspective which would allow for thinking about such

harmony. Conviction and the subsequent act of faith are the central motifs of the presented interpretation. The second motif brings us to the next paper on Vladimír Hoppe. The author of the article successfully shows how Hoppe's transcendental self relates to Kierkegaard's understanding of individuality, thus widening the context of thinking about individualism. As far as Tomáš Trnka, the last of the key thinkers of the "younger philosophical generation", is concerned, for pragmatic reasons, we chose to publish the original text accompanied by a commentary. It is meant as a kind of a refreshing break from the interpretational style of other papers, as it builds on an original text which has been translated into English for the very first time.

The third thematic part is especially valuable, for it deals with two significant thinkers of Slovak philosophy. The paper on Svätopluk Štúr warns against the dangers of individualism, as identified by Štúr in the consequences of German philosophy of the will. Interpretation of Gejza Vámoš is focused on the concept of the "reality argument" and its impact on life of an individual as well as on life of the society.

The following part is composed of three hermeneutic commentaries on one single philosopher. Undoubtedly, Ladislav Klíma does deserve such "loaded attention", for he was the purest thinker of individualism at that time. Klíma intensified his understanding of the individual into seemingly exalted positions interpreted by the first two papers; Klíma's solipsism on the one hand, his egosolism on the other. The third paper aims at assessing the reception of Klíma's allegedly extravagant philosophy by his contemporaries, based on thorough archive research. The paper concludes that Klíma was acknowledged and highly valued by most of them.

The remaining two studies summarise, to a certain extent historically, the philosophy of individualism in Czechoslovak intellectual milieu. The paper dealing with the discussion of existentialism in the journal *Listy* describes one of its last breaths. Soon afterwards the term "individual" was cursed. The prophecy uttered by Masaryk and Peroutka, who hoped to be wrong, turned out to be correct, very painfully so. This is why the last paper is dedicated to their successor, in the presidential office as well as in the sense of a democratic politician – Edvard Beneš. The interpretation builds on Beneš's little known and as yet unpublished dissertation *On the Origin and Development of Modern Political Individualism* (*O vzniku a vývoji moderního politického individualismu*), which is further supported by better known texts that Beneš wrote on the problem of individualism.

To sum up, the philosophy of individualism shaped the relatively short period of freedom between the two world wars. Politically, it served as a strongly based alternative to a more and more proliferating collectivism, which intoxicated the masses and usually turned away from the individual.

Philosophically, it stirred intensive interest in the question of the appropriate source for strengthening one's character and morally consistent stance. These two aspects were linked together by the problem of human freedom, so urgent amidst the rapidly changing modern world. Hopefully, the authors were successful at unveiling the life struggle for freedom of the individual in the interwar Czechoslovakia.