

The Reality Argument and Its Impact on the Individual Through the Eyes of Gejza Vámoš

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“For people always treat you the way you educate them to.”

Gejza Vámoš (1901–1956), a medical doctor and philosophising author of prose, often dubbed a rebel of his times, rarely comes to the public attention today, and if so, then it is mainly as a writer. Nevertheless, many attentive readers and researchers took notice of the philosophical side of his writings, too.² Yet, his only officially philosophical works include the dissertation thesis *The Cruelty Principle (Princíp krutosti)*, subtitled *A Microbe and a Human (Mikrób a človek)*, and a short essay *The Reality Argument (Argument skutočnosti)* which I believe could be the key text to a deeper understanding of Vámoš’s literary work. Both texts date back to 1930s. This paper traces the argumentation line of the aforementioned essay with a focus on the problem of individualism. I shall deal neither with the circumstances that led to the creation of the essay, nor with a broader perspective on the relation of the essay to other works by Vámoš. The focal point of this paper is the essay alone.³

1 Vámoš, G., *A Hypochondriach (Hypochonder)*. In: *A Half-Man and Other Works of Prose (Pol-človek a iné prózy)*. Bratislava, Kalligram 2016, p. 15.

2 Especially Dagmar Kročanová, Erika Lalíková and Milan Žigo.

3 In Vámoš’s correspondence with his teacher and friend Josef Tvrđý, we can read that Vámoš understood this essay as a kind of return to (academic) philosophy. He himself writes that he expects to be encouraged to write more and already has plenty of ideas for many other texts of a similar character. The correspondence is kept in Vámoš’s personal archive in the Literary Archive of Slovak National Library. The circumstances that led to the creation of the essay are analysed through the perspective of the “Scandal in Bahnany” (*bahnianska aféra*), as it is called, in the book by Lalíková, E., *Reality and Philosophy in Slovakia: Ján Lajčiak, Gejza Vámoš and Svätopluk Štúr (Realita a filozofia na Slovensku: Ján Lajčiak, Gejza Vámoš a Svätopluk Štúr)*. Bratislava, IRIS 2010.

“Even the most absurd lie and fabrication can become the argument of reality, provided they are served to people with the sufficient oratory zeal.”⁴

This is the phenomenon that Gejza Vámoš draws attention to in *The Reality Argument*, whose title is also the term of the new concept that he introduces in it. Vámoš does not explicitly create a typology of individuals. It seems that he is *warning against* individualism, especially if fostered in the wrong hands or if misunderstood.

The introductory reflection of the essay deals with two interconnected phenomena which, according to Vámoš, are part of man’s *conditio humana*. On the one hand, we desire to shed light on the mechanisms of both the world and life in their entirety; on the other hand we would prefer to find the explanation in a simple principle applicable to everything. On the one hand, we are searching for a universal principle, while on the other hand, we are willing to see it in every coincidence and are capable of justifying it and rationalising it retrospectively.

“We seem to have a desire to introduce mathematical certainty into the apparent anarchy and unpredictability of a phenomenon.”⁵

Attempts to (re)organise the world, to find new perspectives on life usually take the form of a search for one or several key principles to build on. These principles tend to be very general and also as old as the world itself. But their meaning is explained in a new way, filling them with new content; put simply, their *value is transvalued*. If this goes well, these principles will then lead people (groups or individuals) for some time to a shared understanding of society, world or life or other more concrete *realities*.

Particular Accentuation of Ideas

I understand the reality argument as evidence of or a *reason for reality*. People as percipients of reality require evidence or reasons to understand it; we need somehow to justify reality. However, the human mind is fragmented and so we can never see the whole,⁶ we can never encompass reality absolutely, which is why we justify reality by accentuating particular terms or ideas.

4 Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument (Argument skutočnosti)*. In: *The Cruelty Principle (Princíp krutosti)*. Bratislava, Chronos 1996, p. 144. This is the only publication of Vámoš’s dissertation thesis and essay *The Reality Argument*.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

The reality argument is based on particular *accentuation*, i.e. *partial emphasis* of an idea that might look random or insufficiently thought over, when looked at *a posteriori*.⁷ Nevertheless, whatever is thus accentuated is also ridged of its context. That is why Vámoš says that an idea (or a feeling, a thought) has *been* “just overly accentuated.”⁸ When such particularly accentuated idea becomes a cornerstone of a system, the system becomes unhealthy; it stands and falls together with the idea. And the only thing that can at least postpone, if not halt such a fall is if a particularly accentuated idea remains “the main propeller of the community’s worldview”, unassessed and unreflected any further.⁹ Vámoš’s concept brings to mind Nietzsche’s words on the creation of truth and forgotten metaphors.¹⁰

Paradoxically, a merely *partially accentuated* phenomenon then becomes an empty concept that can be filled with anything as needed, thereby also becoming a concept that is exaggeratedly overloaded with meaning. The whole problem is hidden in the very name: *particularly*, therefore not completely, and *accentuated*, which means emphasised, but not fully grasped and understood. Thus, every particular accentuation creates a new concept; an imperfect version of the accentuated.

Particular accentuation of an idea is an initial stage and a means used in an effort to create order by intuitive, random “extraction” of one part of a chaotic whole, elevated to the principle governing organisation of the whole.

A Particularly Accentuated Idea as a Reality Argument

However, a particularly accentuated idea is often as persuasive as an idea that is grasped completely. Both of them can act as a *reality argument*. A reality argument functions beyond good and evil, it functions when it is *sufficiently powerful and persuasive*. Its validity and invalidity, correctness and incorrectness, usefulness and harmfulness play no role in its mechanism. On many occasions, Vámoš points this fact out and warns against it.¹¹ Later in

7 Vámoš often uses the umbrella term “idea” to refer to a thought, an emotion, a feeling, a phenomenon or a thing. It seems that in the essay *The Reality Argument*, an “idea” designates anything that can be particularly accentuated. Loose use of terms as well as a somewhat hesitant building of argumentation line is noted by Lalíková, E., *Reality and Philosophy in Slovakia: Ján Lajčiak, Gejza Vámoš and Svätopluk Štúr*, p. 54.

8 Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument*, p. 132–133.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

10 Nietzsche, F., *On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense*. In: Nietzsche, F. – Geuss, R. – Speirs, R., *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1999, p. 139 to 154.

11 E.g. the example involving a physician, see Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument*, p. 143–144. This motif appears on multiple occasions also in his two-volume novel *The Atoms of God*. See Vámoš, G., *The Atoms of God (Atómy Boha)*. Bratislava, Dilema 2003.

this article, we will also deal with Vámoš's proposal of a "correct" handling of the reality argument, as well as with its educational aspect.

Love, for Vámoš, is an example of an ancient particularly accentuated idea in society.¹² Due to particular accentuation, this feeling has been ripped from the intricate complex of human feelings.¹³ Love has become a "great organising and unifying idea of very large human groups."¹⁴ Love has been artificially prioritised over other feelings through particular accentuation. The other, unaccentuated feelings were pushed aside, paralysed and slowly engulfed by it. Despite its "original" intention, love thy neighbour, in fact, conceals fear and violence within it. "It was believed that love is the power that all must succumb to."¹⁵ Particular accentuation pays no attention to the importance of mutual interdependence of phenomena. Due to particular accentuation, a phenomenon begins to absorb subordinated phenomena, thus negating itself and emptying itself to make it all-encompassing.

However, particular accentuation of love has not always played the only role in unifying the groups. Fear, sexuality, the idea of the immortality of the soul or of an afterlife, powerful natural phenomena – these were all particular ideas forming "society, worldview, religions and lifestyle."¹⁶

Vámoš admits that particular accentuation of an idea can serve as the first solid foundation for the creation of a system – in that case, however, its choice must not be *random*. The selection of a phenomenon that can aspire to the role of the keeper of order in a system must be thoroughly thought through, and the depth of its meaning maintained. In the case of love, according to Vámoš,

"the innate or malicious obtuseness of an individual for whom moral laws mean nothing... [and the fact that love]... is not only helpless, but it itself has a tendency to back down to an evildoer, or even worse, create a privileged positions for him was deliberately omitted."¹⁷

The particular accentuation of love allows for an evildoer, because it is able to stand against him only at the expense of its own position. On the other hand, an evildoer is capable of destroying it without leaving his position at all.

12 Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument*, p. 131.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 133–134.

The Difference between the Reality Argument and Habit

Let us return to the preliminary attempt at finding new perspectives on life and the world. Such efforts require us to try to “stop and think about phenomena... that are *hidden from us by habit* and *forced on us* – by the reality argument.”¹⁸ Habituation conceals that to which we are accustomed; that which has thus become a matter-of-course to us. The reality argument foists on us that which proves its own reality the most forcefully, thus overshadowing all other possibilities of perceiving reality. The reality argument always readily *justifies* reality in a somewhat one-sided, biased manner.

Vámoš attempts to demonstrate the difference between habit and the reality argument using an example of an ideal society whose functioning is suddenly interrupted. In such circumstances, the people would rebel and would only calm down once their society managed to establish an order that would remind them of the “original state of affairs”. Although, of course, a quick reaction depends on knowledge of what a functional, ideal situation is, *the abruptness of change* of circumstances would be an inevitable impulse for a thorough reform of the standards that the world has suddenly lost. However, if the destructive change was slow and lengthy, even spanning several generations, it would be *habit* that would obstruct prompt efforts at reform.¹⁹

What Vámoš tries to demonstrate here is that although we would probably ascribe such apathy to habit, its true cause lies in the reality argument, as it concerns things to which it is impossible to become accustomed. While a habit concentrates on one specific, long-term aspect without overshadowing others (i.e. its sphere of influence is limited), the reality argument overshadows everything for the sake of one thing (i.e. its sphere of influence is unlimited).²⁰ The consequence of this overshadowing is that an individual is able to perceive only the most pressing issues that push themselves upon him “thanks to their bare essence”, by power of the argument of *their own reality*.²¹

It is “a morphine that numbs into absolute stupor... [and] does not need duration, or repetition [...] silencing resistance at once [...]. It frequently works against habit and does this so efficiently that it soon gives rise to phenomena that suffocate agility and even the mere intention to resist.”²² Vámoš

18 Ibid., p. 136.

19 Ibid., p. 139.

20 Ibid., p. 140.

21 Ibid., p. 141.

22 Ibid., p. 140.

often proclaims in a Nietzsche-like manner that a human being is capable of bearing suffering so great that no animal could withstand, simply because he is able to give his suffering a meaning. *The role of the reality argument is to justify suffering, to justify reality.* Under its burden, people are able to remain silent even about things to which it is impossible to become accustomed.

The pressure of the reality argument often relativises established rules. When, for example, impertinence or a lie is so uninhibited and inventive that it becomes “exciting”, it becomes impossible to fight against them and soon they are accepted with a kind of a “benevolent awe.” In this case, that which would usually be reproved and condemned, thanks to the rhetoric of a magnetic personality or due to a sudden and unexpected event, begins to daze us when presented as a reality argument.²³ As Vámoš writes,

“even the most perverse suspicion and the most vulgar lie will find their way into the minds of people, provided they are uttered boldly and with a blind determination that has respect for nothing.”²⁴

The Influence of the Reality Argument on an Individual and on a Group of Individuals

The reality argument can influence both an individual and a group of individuals. People live under its powerful influence and there is hardly an individual that succeeds in cutting himself off from his own reality arguments. It is all the more difficult to set oneself free from a collective reality argument. As far as the influence on the individual is concerned, Vámoš furnishes us with examples of particularly accentuated ideas. Many of them can be found in Vámoš’ works of prose, but there is not enough space to deal with them properly in this paper. However, we shall have a look at a few of them at least. In *The Reality Argument*, Vámoš describes the particular accentuation in the context of the individual as a certain form of *stereotype*.

The first example involves an individual living under the influence of *his own lifelong efforts and individual desires*. He has become absorbed by the pursuit of his own particularly accentuated success and particularly accentuated individual uniqueness. Another example is a life lived under the influence of a reality argument regarding one’s own *physical prowess, beauty or ugliness*. Vámoš writes of an exceptionally physically indisposed and disfigured Italian singer cast in the role of a Wagnerian hero. When he stepped on the stage, the audience was so disgusted and shocked by his appearance that the singer

²³ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁴ Ibid.

could not contain himself and persuaded them to listen to and judge his singing, rather than immediately turn away from his hideousness.²⁵ The example demonstrates that the audience succumbed to the ugliness of the singer so quickly and eagerly that it became blind even to the possibility that there might be something beautiful about him, perhaps his singing.

Last but not least, age can also be an all too powerful factor in quick and unreflected judgements, provided it is particularly accentuated.

The reality argument on an individual scale is the most common reason for self-conviction about one's own exceptionality or insignificance, which is why it is a great threat to the sense of collective belonging. Vámoš hopes that the sense of collective belonging can serve as a cure to harmful particular accentuations in an individual's life by clearing "the clouds of the argument of one's reality."²⁶

When we speak of influence on the life of human groups, it is important to note that masses accept any reality argument much more easily than an individual, because individuals within a mass are surrounded by a matter-of-fact acceptance of the reason for the given reality.

"The masses take a miserable life as something given and silently bow before a reality argument, i.e. before the fact that they live a life full of suffering. They are capable of suffering to much greater extremes than any animal. An animal would have long ago died as a result of the living standard that a man sees as a matter of fact. In the case of the masses, it is especially true that the power of a reality argument grows along with the intensity and boldness of its presentation."²⁷

It is hard to say what could not become a reality argument. People need common ground, or a common *mentality*, as Vámoš says.²⁸ Be it convincing ideals, empty words, messianic acts or acts of hate – people are willing to suppress their basic needs in the belief that they are helping towards a common goal. *When people are given a suitable reality argument, their sense of collective belonging is reinforced. However, if an individual lives under an overly heavy reality argument relating to his individual life, such a reality argument is useless for reinforcing common goals. It seems that the power of a reality argument lies in a kind of rigid and hidden matter-of-factness and credibility, as well as a subliminal insistence. One needs to feel assured which is why one needs to justify reality by any available means.*

25 Ibid., p. 148–149.

26 Ibid., p. 150.

27 Ibid., p. 152.

28 Ibid., p. 151.

Reality Argument(s) and the Role of the Philosopher

Only few will question an argument of (given) reality, as it is very difficult to notice and even more difficult to “grasp”; it is important to find a way in which to explain it to help it *to be accepted without creating a commotion*. Once a reality argument has been identified, we can begin to fight against it, although we still remain under its influence. Vámoš illustrates this fight by pointing to how science copes with past approaches to knowledge.²⁹ The need to tackle superstitions and dogmas proves that science is not yet fully free from them and still bears the burden of the reality argument. Yet another consequence of the effect of the reality argument is that it is so difficult to unveil or even discuss social taboo.³⁰ In short, what truly makes any change so difficult is the power with which the given reality is justified, the power of its reality argument.

Vámoš pictures his new concept as a “lantern bringing light into the ignored and invisible areas where phenomena interconnect,”³¹ or as a guide that helps to see through or at least become aware of the fact that such a thing as a reality argument exists, as well as where and what kind of particular accentuation is at work. The new concept helps to give a name to a phenomenon that had no name before, as well as to study its forms. Nevertheless, it would be a Herculean task to introduce the concept in a way that the masses would understand its principles, as it is already difficult to communicate this to a contemplative individual. As Vámoš remarks,

“exceptional expertise is in no way sufficient – this facilitates only a one-sided perception, but the ability to ‘see’ and ‘recognise’ requires an almost poetic, innate talent and a specially developed sense of direction. It is naïve and pointless to expect something like this from the masses.”³²

A strong individual is the one who is able to *see and recognise* (but also to *create*) a reality argument – a person who is able to step back for a moment from the ordinary course of life and “glimpse the truth”.

“Every time we attempt to find a new perspective on an old issue, we do so hoping that this new perspective, albeit artificial and speculative,

29 Ibid., p. 154.

30 Vámoš’s literary work came to the attention of public mainly thanks to him opening many taboo topics.

31 Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument*, p. 141.

32 Ibid., p. 157.

will help us sharpen our sight and make us stop and think about burdensome matters which are hidden from us by habit and forced on us by the reality argument. Let us make sure that this perspective will not suffer too much from the diseases of similar perspectives.”³³

How can a reality argument be beneficial at all? Vámoš relies on the possibility of an *educational element existing in a reality argument*. A specific strong individual can accentuate it and use it as a means of education. His “specific” quality lies in him being a teacher and a “good leader”, assuming roles for the benefit of all. His power lies in understanding the reality arguments that have been at work thus far and in being able to produce them himself. However, this can very easily become dangerous in the wrong hands. Vámoš writes about a vision of a single methodical and leading will that would charm the masses and guide them towards a material and spiritual boom.³⁴ He dreams about a kind of a *universal reality argument* that does not need to be reduced to a particularly accentuated phenomenon, nor does it require an arrogant and coarse declaration of its facticity to assume power. A universal reality argument that would be of real service to humanity should be persuasive purely on the basis of the power of its content founded on the right principles, undeniable by reason. The question is whether something like this is possible at all. What would ensure that the masses, in the end, do not decide to follow a random particularly accentuated phenomenon? Understandably, this question remains unanswered.

True to the “spirit of his time”, Vámoš also deals with the issue of democracy.³⁵ He does so only briefly and in connection with the reality argument.³⁶ At the end of the essay, Vámoš questions the authenticity of a democracy that functions under the pressure of various reality arguments. It is not the people who decide, but the diverse particular accentuations of reality that influence them. Democracy is not the rule of “the people, but rather of extremely sophisticated electoral mechanisms and of methods used by wily egoists to mislead the people into voting for any of a wide range of political parties.”³⁷ Yet, if the reality argument is “applied justly”, the masses do not have to live

33 Ibid., p. 136.

34 Ibid., p. 158.

35 The problem of democracy in the cultural and intellectual milieu of the time when Vámoš took his studies and published his works is analysed, for example, in the article by Pauza, M., Two Ontologies of Czech Democracy: T. G. Masaryk and J. L. Fischer (Dvě ontologie české demokracie: T. G. Masaryk a J. L. Fischer). *Filosofický časopis*, 63, 2015, No. 2, p. 233–245.

36 I shall not attempt a thorough contextual analysis of G. Vámoš’s thought, as neither the extent, nor the focus of this paper allows for that. For this reason, the problem of democracy is also dealt with only within the limits of *The Reality Argument* essay.

37 Ibid.

in a dictatorship-like subservience – the reality argument can educate and *lead them towards democracy*.³⁸ For a democracy to be a real democracy, the people who participate in it must learn how to think and make decisions; otherwise they rule only *de iure*, but *de facto* are ruled by those who know how to use reality arguments for their own benefit.

If a human life is in all cases influenced by many different reality arguments, why not instead give people a single universal, panhuman and universally just *meta-argument of reality that would not be based on (random) particular accentuation*? The reality argument can be beneficial only in its most noble form and in this form alone; according to Vámoš, it can “educate the masses towards conscious democracy.”³⁹ It seems to me that this wish of Vámoš’s can be illustrated by a verse by Novalis:

“The people is an idea. We are to become one people. A perfect human being is a people in miniature. True popularity is the highest goal of humanity.”⁴⁰

The education of the people towards democracy should take the “form of a panhuman, universally just reality that supports the weak and tames the powerful.”⁴¹ Education can turn a mass of weak and self-centred individuals into a kind of “collective individual”, an indivisible, unified society governed by rules common to everyone, achieved through common education and guidance.⁴²

The idea of a beneficial and unifying argument of reality is amongst the last thoughts presented in *The Reality Argument*. Unfortunately, its description is understandably rather schematic. The reality argument can be used for a common good, but it can also be easily abused. According to Vámoš, if anybody then only *a philosopher* is capable of working with a reality argument on an individual scale for the benefit of all, because the philosopher is indeed a *specific* and strong individuality. And so, the philosopher is bound by a duty towards humanity as well as to the reality argument. The philosopher is supposed

38 Ibid., p. 159.

39 Ibid., p. 160.

40 Stoljar, M. M., *Novalis: Philosophical Writings*. Transl. and ed. M. M. Stoljar. New York, State University of New York Press 1997, p. 31.

41 Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument*, p. 159.

42 My understanding of the terms “indivisible and unified society” and “collective individual” is based on the etymology of the word *individual*, which comes from Latin *in-dividere*, i.e. indivisible. By this I also point to the organic aspect of society.

“to see it, uncover it everywhere and not ignore it, but to intentionally search it out and fight against it. To make out a single tree in the forest.”⁴³

To turn the ordinary into the extraordinary, the commonplace into the startling, to liberate enslaved minds from their chains.⁴⁴ To educate and lead in the right direction. The responsibility for the public good that Vámoš places on the philosopher’s shoulders is fully in line with philosophical tradition.

The reality argument is beneficial only in its most noble form, when it educates the masses towards a conscious democracy and is therefore acceptable only as long as it is educational.⁴⁵ It helps people to become individuals, because democracy can function properly only when it is built by individuals – however, not the egocentric kind, but somehow “collective individuals”. However, ideally they need to be cultivated very carefully by a strong individual, otherwise they would turn into a mere mass again.

The question remains whether it is feasible to get shake the (not completely admitted) habit of justifying reality particularly. In the introduction of his essay, Vámoš writes about the inability of man to encompass the totality of reality; this is why the need to “help oneself out” using particular accentuation emerged. Bearing this in mind, it is very difficult to envision Vámoš’s “noble” reality argument. It might be of help that, according to Vámoš, it is something that does not need particular justification, particular accentuation. On the contrary, it should be built on a painstaking effort to *see* and understand reality in its contexts, even though they can never be fully grasped.

43 Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument*, p. 160.

44 On many occasions in his texts, Vámoš attempts to link natural sciences (especially medicine) with sociology and philosophy that were in their infancy at that time. His lifelong goal was to become a versatile educator with literature being at the core of the education of society. He probably wanted to become the philosopher of the kind described in the *Reality Argument*. In his literary remains we read: “I would consider it to be an insult if I were but a stable and steady wheel in the clock mechanism of today.” Vámoš, G., *The Grammarians (Pravopisári)*. Literary Archive of the Slovak National Library, sign. 72 AB 9.

45 Vámoš, G., *The Reality Argument*, p. 160.