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The crisis of modern man in the light of Masaryk's national philosophy

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Abstract

From the very beginnings of his thought, Thomas Garrigue Masaryk was convinced that modern man, and likewise the culturally and politically emancipated Czech nation, was in a deep existential crisis closely linked with the spread of irreligiosity. Masaryk gradually came to believe that this crisis could be positively overcome on two levels. On a theoretical level, he relied on his specific classification and systematization of the sciences. On a practical level, which was directly based on his notion of positive sciences and a strictly rational scientific approach, it was a matter of developing a new direction and method, which he characteristically conceived of as realism. On the eve of the First World War, Masaryk's position became understandably radicalized. He distanced himself from a more objectivist view of religion and countered theism with a scientific and philosophical *anthropism*.

Keywords: crisis of modern man and nation, national emancipation, classification and systematization of sciences, irreligiosity, ethics, humanism, realism, theism, anthropism

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to bring attention to the 'reformative-revolutionary' significance,[2] but also the basic ideological connotations of the principled philosophical stance of the first president of independent Czechoslovakia Thomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937),[3] which may be considered the driving force of all his original practical and political efforts to socially emancipate the Czech and then Czechoslovak nation (Gluchman, 2021; Jahelka, 2018; Lalíková, 2017), as well as the fundamental ideological source of inspiration and necessary philosophically directed motivation for his thematically rich literary activity. Masaryk profoundly experienced the characteristic ambivalence of his time, which he believed was manifest in the existentially moral and ideologically historical anchorlessness of modern, scientifically thinking man – and in turn the culturally and politically conscious Czech nation as it existed in the supranational social structures of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. He believed the main reason for this was the rigidity of the retrograde political-economic power system, which hindered the free development of man's natural creative abilities deriving from his own social nature. From the very beginnings of his thought, Masaryk therefore actively worked to gradually democratize Czech society and universally pursued the modernizing-humanizing spirit of the age (Masaryk, 1993), later understandably radicalizing his positivist thinking (Masaryk, 1961).

However, his conception of humanism and democracy, which consistently referred to the specific spiritual tradition of the Czech Reformation, cannot be perceived as a mere objective political theory. Philosophically, it is connected as closely as possible with a metaphysical

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[2] "True revolution is reformative revolution, and therefore those who defend and advocate revolution, continually insist that preparatory work in the mental sphere is essential, that only those revolutions that have been deliberately thought out in advance can possibly prove successful" (Masaryk, 1968, pp. 536–537).

[3] Masaryk, who was a philosopher by profession and had worked for nearly thirty years as a professor of philosophy and sociology at Prague university, fulfilled the Platonic ideal of philosopher statesman like no one else at the time. As the leading representative of the Czech diplomatic resistance in exile and a staunch opponent of the war that had broken up the monarchy after the assassination in Sarajevo, Masaryk eventually organized the foreign legions fighting for an independent Czechoslovak state and after the defeat of the Central Powers in 1918 became the first president in the history of our country.

dimension, which takes a transcendent perspective to effectively bring together positivist science, a strictly rational scientific attitude, and a 'meta-narrative' of rationally theistic discourse (Svoboda, 2018). Against the background of a conscious effort to creatively intertwine the synthetic and dialectical, Masaryk's modernist approach to humanism and democracy can be regarded as an impressive attempt to bridge two highly distinct spheres to which individuals fundamentally relate in their lives as conscious subjects: the spheres of *science* and *faith* (Grim Feinberg, 2019). Masaryk's lifelong modernist belief in theistic determinism was deepened in various psychological and sociological aspects[4] and was actually qualitatively conditioned by the natural necessity of an existential balance between the two spheres of our principled philosophical reflection, later becoming significantly modified with his concept of 'anthropism' (Masaryk, 1961, pp. 209 ff). It was this belief that originally gave rise to Masaryk's philosophical starting point: the idea of *the crisis of modern man*.

The crisis of modern man and the laying of the theoretical foundations for a national philosophy

Masaryk was led to philosophy by 'religion and theology', and the religious question has always been 'at the forefront' of his philosophical interest (Masaryk, 2005, pp. 421–423; Drozenová, 2022, p. 26). As early as the 1870s, Masaryk realized that modern, rationally thinking Europeans had found themselves in a deep existential crisis. A typical manifestation of this crisis was an excess of suicides.[5] Under the pressure of scientific advancement and its objectivist methods it was no longer possible to uncritically believe in medieval church dogma and traditions. Nonetheless, Masaryk knew just as well that critically thinking modern man also needed some emotional anchor.

On the one hand, modern man is thus marked by scepticism and agnosticism, which consider all subjective knowledge and metaphysical substructures to be uncertain; this modern scepticism was embodied for Masaryk in David Hume (Masaryk, 1998, pp. 11–61; Drozenová, 2010, p. 369).[6] On the other hand there was Blaise Pascal, an exact scientist, whose lifelong efforts were just as ardently spent seeking the most personal possible relationship with God (Masaryk, 1998, pp. 65–95).[7] Masaryk authentically expressed Pascal's fateful schism between "science" and "faith". He recognized that Pascal had not called for proof of God's existence. Pascal longed to experience the reality of God's presence in the most personal way possible – he longed for that "leap" of faith in which he saw the innermost expression of modern man's desire to emotionally experience divine transcendence. It was through two key lectures on this

[4] As Masaryk put it in *The social question*: "I myself understand the world and history theistically. To me theistic determinism is not only a social, but especially a metaphysical, synergism" (Masaryk, 1972, p. 218).

[5] Masaryk's book *Der Selbstmord als sociale Massenerscheinung der modernen Civilisation* (1881*)* was the first more systematic work that he wrote while studying in Vienna and Leipzig; it was based on his habilitation thesis. The Czech version was not published until 1904 under the title Sebevražda hromadným jevem společenským moderní osvěty (*Suicide as a Mass Social Phenomenon of Modern Civilization*) (Masaryk, 1970). Masaryk's later view of his youthful analysis of suicide: "This piece of work, written on the battlefield, is itself restles; it has not caught the mood of the time completely, but as a whole I think that I have correctly comprehended the strength and weakness of our century – the century of the despairing Titan. The problem is the same everywhere: how to fight out one's own fight with the older order, how to work up a consistent view of life, and finally, how to calm one's own soul. … This fight, as it was carried on by Goethe, Byron, Mickiewicz, Krasinsky, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and all the rest, is a fight about an outlook on the world. It is a fight to get all our knowledge unified and assembled and to put it into harmony with our social system" (Masaryk, 1938, pp. 45–46; Masaryk, 1970, p. viii).

[6] The Czech original entitled *Počet pravděpodobnosti a Humova skepse. Za historický úvod k theorii indukce* [*Probability calculus and Humean scepticism*: *For a historical introduction to the theory of induction*] was published in 1883 and German translation was named *David Hume's Skepsis und die Wahrscheinlichkeitsrechnung. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Logik und Philosophie* (1884).

[7] The Czech original was named *Blaise Pascal, jeho život a filosofie* [*Blaise Pascal, his life and philosophy*] and published in 1883.

subject that Masaryk introduced himself as a freshly appointed professor of philosophy at the newly established Czech branch of Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague.[8]

After these two key lectures in Prague, which were also published in books by the university bookseller Jan Otto,[9] Masaryk outlined his classification and system of sciences in his book *The foundations of concrete logic* in 1885.[10] This book was intended to serve as an introduction to the study of philosophy at a time when Czech textbooks and handbooks for students and the educated public were lacking and much needed in the years following the restoration of the Czech University in Prague (Masaryk, 2004, pp. 194–202).

Beyond that role, the special significance of this positivist book lay in the nature of the philosophical mission it was to represent for the Czech nation. During his previous twelve years in the international environment of Vienna, Masaryk realized the importance of national philosophy and sought a way to gradually move the Czech nation in an original philosophical direction within the broader context of European and global thought, including the foresight of creating close intellectual and political ties to its democratically conscious Central European neighbours and relevant south-eastern social groups within a newly conceived Europe.[11] In 1925, Masaryk states: "In *Concrete Logic*, I believe I made the first attempt to create a Czech or, if you like, Slavic philosophy" (Masaryk, 2005, pp. 424).

Taking this later important statement in conjunction with Masaryk's activities for the Czech scientific journal *Athenaeum*, where he addressed the issue of science classification and systematization before the writing of *Concrete Logic* and developed this newly created scientific journal according to positivist concepts (Král, 2012), as well as taking into account Masaryk's lifelong interest in this key issue, including his later attempts to revise *Concrete Logic* in 1904 and the later 1920s (Svoboda, 2017, pp. 157–163), one cannot help but see that Masaryk's philosophical stance was not only consistent, but also, from the very beginning, comprehensively program-oriented with a purposeful long-term direction.

According to Masaryk, this positivist philosophical attitude was supposed to free the Czech nation from a one-sided focus on German sources of thought and, with its specific elaboration, place it step by step at the centre of European and global philosophical affairs (Masaryk, 2004, pp. 157–158).

An essential step in understanding Masaryk's entire later political-philosophical concept is his notion of ethics (Svoboda, 2022). Briefly, let us first recall how in this work Masaryk understands ethics in the context of the scientific scale he has elaborated. In *Concrete Logic*, he still places ethics among the practical sciences. However, it is characteristic of the development

[8] The language of instruction at the University of Prague was initially only German. But as the movement for national self-determination gained strength among Czechs in the empire, in 1882 the University of Prague split into the Czech University and the German University.

[9] Together with Masaryk's works *Teorie dějin dle zásad T. H. Bucklea* [*Theory of History According to the Principles of T. H. Buckle*] (1883) and *O studiu děl básnických* [*On the Study of Poetical Works*] in 1884 (Masaryk, 1998, pp. 97–144).

[10] Let us add that Masaryk formulated this outline of a conception of philosophy to Czech readers in his *Základové konkretné logiky (Foundations of Concrete Logic)* just three years after joining the newly founded Czech university (Masaryk, 2001a). Two years later, in 1887, he presented this philosophical proposal of scientific system and classification in an expanded German version as the *Versuch einer concreten Logik*. The book was published by Carl Konegen in Vienna and translated by Hubert Gordon Schauer, a literary critic and essayist (as we learn from Jindřich Srovnal's editorial note). The German version was translated into Czech much later, at the end of the twentieth century, by Karel Berka and Jindřich Srovnal. I use the term 'Concrete Logic' to refer jointly to both these works, i.e., both the Czech and the German edition. In this text, however, I rely mostly on the Czech translation of the expanded German edition (Masaryk, 2001b; Flint, 1904, pp. 272–283; Bliss, 1929, pp. 356–357).

[11] "It was a matter of establishing an analogy of the *American Union* in Central and Southeastern Europe, the elements of which would remain not national but multinational states. Such entities would be ideologically and culturally oriented towards the West, but *politically* would remain partners or independent counterweights. The fate of the Czechoslovak Republic would then be connected with this formation as a longer-term guarantee of its existence" (Pauza, 2018, pp. 668–669).

of his socially oriented philosophical position that at the turn of the century he literally declared ethics to be the 'core' of philosophy, and of his 'scientific' metaphysics (Masaryk, 1900, p. 12; Masaryk, 1902, p. 2).

It is interesting from a philosophical perspective that Masaryk's 'scientific' metaphysics – as a general world view – had two important functions. On the one hand, it was supposed to serve as the functional framework for all the sciences – including those that had yet to develop organically into specific disciplines or combine to form marginal disciplines, and on the other hand it was a significant component of Masaryk's notion of psychology. Psychology, as Masaryk conceived it, was not a narrowly specialized discipline, but one that justifiably acknowledged its metaphysical dimension and did so in reference to a notion of ethics and, as a necessary gnoseological consequence, also to religion (Masaryk, 2012, pp. 312 ff). Not only is ethics thereby inserted into the frame of psychological subject matter, but at the same time we can clearly see an unmistakable feature of Masaryk's conception of ethics, namely the subjectively engaged side of it that favours assigning a moral dimension to human decisions and actions (Hála, 1994, p. 95).

This was also the reason why in his general classification of sciences Masaryk placed psychology ahead of sociology (which he basically reduced to social dynamics, i.e. the philosophy of history) and why here, in *Concrete Logic*, he considers it to be a "basic" science. Masaryk considers consciousness to be a phenomenon *sui generis* which in his words, "assures us of ourselves", or, as Masaryk goes on to say, psychology is the "only" science that bestows man with "absolute knowledge" (Masaryk, 2001b, pp. 101–115). Metaphysics exists both 'within' and "among" every science – metaphysics is a part of every science, the sciences all have a metaphysical dimension – yet metaphysics is also one science among others (Masaryk, 1995, p. 155)[12] – and thus represents a permanent challenge for science and above all psychology. Metaphysics, as the culminating frame that exists around every science, serves as a kind of figurative or functional receptacle or *depository* (Masaryk, 2001b, p. 110; Svoboda, 2020), of what knowledge we have in a particular science. As that particular science advances, its metaphysical frame, the depository of our knowledge, also necessarily changes, and it does so both quantitatively and *qualitatively.* It is thus in principle open to "real" subjects and above all the desired need to define ethical value. This qualitative transformation is of primary relevance for the position of pre-eminence Masaryk assigned to psychology within his system. It was in the context of how practical sciences relate to concrete individuals and individual objects that Masaryk talked about the lesser and greater purposes of things, applying a teleological approach to 'things themselves' or – as he also sometimes says – to the 'personalities' of things (for the subject). By opening up this field of action, in which we necessarily move towards a reflexive grasp of individuals through those lower and higher purposes, Masaryk gradually leads us to a sphere in which individuals are 'consciously' imparted their (teleological) meaning and therefore 'for the subject' exist purely purposefully – bringing us to the sphere of our very own *existence* (Masaryk, 2001b, pp. 173–177).

Masaryk's 'political' realism as a national program and the crisis of liberalism

In the environment of liberal Vienna (Masaryk, 1993), which created a kind of intellectual and political microcosm of the monarchy, Masaryk had already begun to realize that modern man is an integral part of the global process of civilization that we today call globalization (Masaryk, 2000a, p. 111). However, the burning question of the meaning of the existence of individual nations arose, which in turn called for their moral justification (Schauer, 1886). Only in this way can a nation retain its independence, traditional originality and generally enriching

[12] Here I refer deliberately to the Czech version of Masaryk's book. The English translation of this passage departs in meaning from the Czech version in that it does not take into account philosophy's purpose in relation to the sciences – it is 'v nich' [in them] (Masaryk, 1961, p. 213).

distinctiveness. Drawing on international intellectual movements and his domestic intellectual forerunners, Masaryk found this principled justification of the Czech nation in the concept of *humanism*.

However, it was necessary to give this timeless moral idea, for which we must work tirelessly, a real political direction anchored on solid theoretical foundations. Masaryk characterized this new and philosophically based political orientation of the nation in *The Czech Question* (1895) as 'political' realism (Masaryk, 2000a, pp. 116 ff). He did not forget to point out in this thematically key work the very philosophical essence of his realism, which, as he unabashedly emphasized, he had theoretically elaborated in his earlier positivist-oriented works. In his own words: "As far as I am concerned, I have tried to explain this view scientifically in my *Concrete Logic* and before in the study of Buckle and to draw the main scientific and social consequences from it" (Masaryk, 2000a, p. 116). He further clarified his position by asserting that political realism was meant to serve as a 'direction and method', a particular philosophical-sociological approach to reality, which could be used to effectively steer and fulfil the national idea and thereby continuously refresh its 'meaning' in relation to the needs and potential of society's development (Masaryk, 2000a, p. 180). At a time when national emancipation had already made considerable progress and an urgent need had arisen to democratize society (Urban, 1990, pp. 433 ff), Masaryk made social statics his priority (Masaryk, 1972, pp. 84–86; Masaryk, 2000b, pp. 79–80), which is to say that he was primarily concerned with actively establishing a social *consensus*, rather than being preoccupied with a one-sided consideration of the past. Responsible individuals who had developed a moral consciousness by practising the idea of humanism had an essential role to play in this democratizing process of 'societal' self-awareness. Their role was essentially the same as that played by people in the late Middle Ages, when they began to sense a conflict between the authority of the church as an institution and the authority of the individual's conscience, and there were calls to reform society through the restoration of religious moral principles. This is exactly what was attempted in the early fifteenth century – more than a century before the Lutheran Reformation – by Jan Hus and the Hussite movement and the turbulent Czech Reformation (which lasted almost two centuries).

In terms of practical politics, in the spirit of the best humanist traditions, realism was supposed to be a kind of middle road – a kind of functional equilibrium between the two prevailing extremes in national politics: between conservatism (unilaterally turned towards the past) and radicalism (not interested in the past and often using a 'very false logic' to change the present). Realism did not differ significantly from radicalism in theory, but it did in practice: "Radicals make leaps, we go step by step" (Masaryk, 2000a, pp. 118–119).

In contrast to the conscious inclination towards realism (or concretism) tasked with gradually transforming all of Czech national politics in strict accordance with the national tradition of humanism, political radicalism of that time was according to Masaryk imbued with the destructive spirit of revolution, and with its precipitous 'bounding' nature insensitively turned away from everything that required positive continuity. Masaryk referred to this revolutionary radicalism as 'liberalist indifferentism' (Masaryk, 2000a, pp. 88, 347–348). It is indifferent because, in his view, it lacks the necessary philosophical foundation: it manifests itself as eclecticism lacking a unified worldview, as dilettantism and inconsistent scientific sophistication (Masaryk, 2000a, pp. 221–236). Nonetheless, as Masaryk further significantly states – realism in the sense of positivism is not enough. It is not just a matter of drawing attention to the individual (external) raw or 'brute facts' (Masaryk, 2012, pp. 255, 329, 348), referred to by British empiricists as the data of immediate consciousness. Masaryk also considers "thinking, feeling and wanting" to be "facts", because we always observe these (psychological) "facts" as "*we* the people" – "*our* reason"; likewise, in this regard we must always realize that we do not only confirm the existence of parts of the universe, but also its

whole – we cannot fail to observe "development, ideas! … You will not vanquish your conscience with a positivist phrase" (Masaryk, 2000a, pp. 236–237)!

And Masaryk summarizes:

> *Liberalism* is the essence of philosophical rationalism, which very often and unilaterally denies the religious and ethical meaning of life and culture, socially it is an aristocratic-plutocratic philosophy. …This liberalism is inconsistent with the basic idea of our revival, namely with the idea of humanism, if in our country it has sprung from our fraternity. Our fraternity differs from the "fraternity" of the French Revolution. Our fraternity was based on religious feelings and ideas, while the revolutionary brotherhood was a negation of religious feeling, it sprang from political efforts. … Our national, Czech humanist ideal is not identical with revolutionary humanism; it is our ignorance of this difference whence springs our inability to *properly build on our own past and continue in a truly Czech spirit* (Masaryk, 2000a, p. 316).

Already in the period after his transition from Vienna to Prague Masaryk observed and categorically rejected this fashionable liberalist attitude among young intellectuals, who considered emotion and religion a thing of the past (Čapek, 2013, pp. 67–68; Masaryk, 1927, pp. 85–86; Masaryk, 2005, pp. 423 ff). The critique of this atheistic attitude of steadily radicalizing young intellectuals, which we find in *The Czech question* (and which permeates the entire trilogy), was also the essence of Masaryk's critique of Marxism in *The social question* (1898).

Anthropism as the new philosophy of a democratizing Europe

When Masaryk's *Russland und Europa* (1913) was published by Diederichs press in Jena[13] just before the start of the First World War, his realist viewpoint had acquired significantly more concrete contours. In trying to formulate a revolutionary thesis that was wholeheartedly opposed to the dysfunctional theocratic-aristocratic social orders and was a radical expression of the need for a new democratic social system, Masaryk shed his objectivist view of religion and against theism asserted scientific and philosophical *anthropism* (Masaryk, 1961, p. 209 ff; Nový, 1990).

Anthropism for Masaryk referred to a 'new philosophy' which not only effectively meshed with the modernizing spirit of developing world history, but also, with its unique national character, was to become an enriching distinctive part of this positive historical development. Masaryk summarized the significance of this new philosophy into three antitheses: 1) Philosophy is absolutely opposed to theology, and anthropism to theism; but this must not be taken to imply that theism is utterly false, or that anthropism is atheistic, for all that is meant is that the anthropistic outlook and point of departure has come into its own in modern philosophy. 2) At the same time, in the political sphere, democracy is counterposed to theocracy, to theocratic aristocracy, thus signifying that democracy, likewise, possesses theoretical and philosophical importance. 3) In ultimate analysis, modern philosophy has ceased to be the queen of the sciences – it is *scientia generalis* (Masaryk, 1961, p. 213).

Conclusion

Anthropism underlines the moral quality, spiritual awareness, and preparedness of the individual, and the 'conviction' of the responsible individual who is the true and ultimate object of scientific research and the measure of all things in science. Furthermore, as Masaryk's consistent outlook shows, this is the 'conviction' of someone who is engaged in a permanent

[13] First published in Czech (in two volumes) by Laichter publishers in 1919 (Masaryk, 1995, p. 359 [note on the publication]).

active dialogue with transcendence – to which he constantly existentially relates, and which is the essential (historical) premise and guarantee of a positive future. The scientific stage of development, the positive validity of which (despite a certain retrogression) could no longer be reasonably denied, was then incorporated into Masaryk's philosophical concept of humanity as a self-evident and historically given condition. And while the objectivity that comes with this stage was deemed essential for understanding historical development, for Masaryk it ceased to be the sole idea underpinning history. Masaryk irreversibly assigned responsibility for the meaning of history to morally conscious and responsible individuals, who possess not just 'knowledge' but also the fundamental integrity of their own 'conscience'. Contrary to any penchant for philosophical defeatism, Masaryk emphasizes that philosophical attention should be turned to the present and its real tasks. It purposefully balances its (traditionalist) heteronomous position with an autonomous one.

From the perspective of the necessary outcome of historical development, an inevitable milestone of which was world war conflagration, anthropism can be considered a most emphatic call to preserve the most basic humanity-based values, which have come under serious threat. Thus, the most peculiar program of anthropism is to save what the pre-war atmosphere began to contemptuously overlook. Anthropism, therefore, *a priori*, does not rule out a fundamentally higher reality that transcends man and can be the norm and source of necessary spiritual-moral strength and motivation. Anthropism endeavours to draw from all real knowledge and fruitful considerations of humanity from the point of view of the humanities, especially from a deeply felt sociological notion of altruism and a principled understanding of the practical-philosophical meaning of psychology. It aims to effectively rationally combine a purely utilitarian approach and natural sense of justice with the most internally experienced sense of personal commitment and balanced human character. It is the quintessential expression of personal faith – the (irreversible) conviction of modern, democratically conscious man in the positive direction of modern history and its meaningful development towards a higher humanity. In other words: The consistent realization of anthropism elaborated in all necessary positive aspects and existential contexts leads to the coveted overcoming of the spiritual crisis of man and nation – the necessary maturation, awareness and self-understanding of man and nation in a higher supra-individual, supranational whole.

In the words of literary historian, evangelical thinker and Czech Slovakist Jan Blahoslav Čapek (1903–1982):

> Anthropism is based on biology and rises in the field of social sciences to the greatest ideas that humanity is capable of. … Anthropism encompasses knowledge, protest and program: knowledge of everything essential about humanity and its relationships and developmental possibilities, protest against all inhumanity and anti-humanism, and a program striving for a new humanity demonstrably higher than the humanity of yesterday. Anthropism strives for the highest goals, but at the same time desires its entire starting point, base and approach to be fully realistic and empirical. Anthropism is above all a *viewpoint on life* giving rise to both philosophical and practical aspects. Only secondarily is anthropism a *method* that can and should be applied in various scientific, artistic and spiritual fields of life" (Čapek, 2014, pp. 20–22).

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