

Masaryk as a philosopher for today [1986]

I

Years ago now, at the time when our hopes briefly flowered, I wrote a paper in which I discussed the extent to which Masaryk could guide and assist us at that time of social crisis. I concluded with a warning against superficial optimism, on the grounds that sinfulness always leads to judgement.¹ What I understood by „sinfulness“ in that context was the weakening of the nation’s moral fibre in the previous years, a phenomenon most marked among the educated. Of course, my vision of the „judgement“ to come in no way resembled, however, what we have now, i.e. the cultural and spiritual disaster which was shortly to overtake us and in which we live now, despite the unexpectedly powerful wave of political and moral indignation with which the nation (alas so briefly) greeted the – in many respects absurd – military intervention. This put paid once more to any opportunity there might have been of drawing on Masaryk’s legacy to help us tackle society’s ills. It became out of the question even to update Masaryk’s remarkable concept of the important role that science could play in renewing society and keeping it healthy.² To start with, all the necessary measures were once again taken to expel and erase Masaryk from most people’s memories and from their awareness, even. And young people were the operation’s prime target. Moreover, no one (and least of all the new state leadership) voiced concern any more about (genuine) efforts to remedy society’s ills. In official circles the so-called „renewal movement“ was spoken of in terms of a mortal peril which we had escaped in the nick of time thanks to the selfless assistance of the country’s true friends. The main effort was to restore pre-January conditions, while expelling the progressive forces and preserving the status quo indefinitely. To this end, neither science nor scholarship were to be included among society’s priorities – quite the opposite, in fact. Thousands of outstanding scholars and renowned scientists not only lost their former positions, but also any real and worthwhile possibility to work in their own particular fields.

In the circumstances, the question may fairly be asked whether there can be any sense nowadays in concerning ourselves with what was undoubtedly a remarkable phenomenon of late nineteenth century/early twentieth century Czech and Czechoslovak cultural history other than in terms of a past that is gone for ever and no longer (to our regret, perhaps) has any topical significance for our times. Moreover, the way things are, there is no hope even of someone publicly attempting to recall Masaryk’s personality, activities and words. This cannot but cast doubt on the chances of reviving interest in Masaryk as a philosopher, particularly in view of the fact that ever since the First Republic, philosophers of the younger generation have either ignored his work, treated it with scepticism or even rejected it outright, calling his ideas old-fashioned, unoriginal or incoherent. And even as recently as the nineteen seventies, the most distinguished Czech post-war philosopher regarded Masaryk’s greatest achievement to have been the founding of the Czechoslovak state – describing it as a unique event in the history

¹ L. Hejdánek: Masaryk a naše dnešní krize [Masaryk and the present crisis]. Tvář 3/1968, No.1 pp. 7-11 of the initial version (due to be published in early September).

² L. Hejdánek: Místo vědy v obrodě společnosti u T. G. Masaryka [T. G. Masaryk on the role of scholarship in social renewal]. Sešity 3/1968 No.1 pp. 7-10 (first written for Tvář 2/1965, but was not passed by the censor; Tvář was discontinued).

of the social influence of philosophers down the ages. And he maintained this regardless of the fact that Masaryk's only genuine pupil and heir criticised his teacher quite severely for the inadequacy of his humanitarian programme and the inconsistency of his concept of democracy. Moreover, even during the eighteen nineties, Masaryk enjoyed very little support amongst his contemporaries (and pupils) and found almost no one who can be said to have really understood him. The situation changed little in the immediate pre-war period and after the establishment of the new republic, the effect of the many and varied popular (and even kitsch) interpretations of Masaryk being to submerge what was essential in his thinking and block all real scope for research. Not only did Masaryk's thinking fail to catch the public's imagination, it even eluded the serious attention of the philosophical community, even though some of them were little more than parasites on his authority, to which they paid lip service only. (This was a charge that Krejčí made against the founders of the *Křesťanská revue*, but in fact it applied equally to others as well). The conclusion one may draw is that we still await a comprehensive and thorough study of Masaryk's thinking, despite the efforts of certain Marxists in the sixties.

Admittedly, it took a long time for both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for example, to be acknowledged as thinkers of prime philosophical relevance – and it was as thinkers that they were „discovered“ many years later and interpreted in a new light. However, in the mean time both of them had survived as literary figures at least. Masaryk lacked that advantage. By and large, his texts do not make for easy reading, on account of the austerity of his style, his unliterary sketchiness, and his seemingly unmethodical approach, but especially because they most of all resemble marginal commentaries scattered variously along the route taken by Masaryk's thinking.

Half a century after his death, we must realistically admit that – at least in certain respects – the interplay of various factors has served so to minimise Masaryk's influence on our society as to render it virtually negligible, and since one cannot turn the clock back, it looks as if this situation cannot be remedied in the case of two generations at least. The living Masaryk is separated from the present not only by the natural bounds of time, but also by an artificial gulf that can no longer be filled, and to bridge it calls for a certain degree of courage and even tortuous exertion. Thus, in the same way that Masaryk himself sought in his works to bridge the centuries and draw inspiration from events of the distant past, so we too will be obliged to probe what superficially may appear to be only shallow layers of history, but have actually been compressed just as drastically as any of those long lost ones that he investigated. At the present time, it would serve little useful purpose to investigate what scope there might be for extending the social impact of Masaryk's philosophy and his ideas in general. However, what we can and must do – initially in a more limited way and then more comprehensively – is to try and achieve a new and methodical approach to and deeper understanding of this great figure, the like of which there have been few in our history, and also to draw philosophical inspiration from him. And there is – in my view, at least – another reason for doing so, namely, that genuine attempts to draw inspiration from Masaryk are part and parcel of efforts to reconstitute and preserve our national identity. This is why it is also the task of those Czech philosophers who still preserve – in Hus' phrase – their „conscience and reason“, to assist this effort to the best of their ability and within their own sphere of

learning. It is a task that will inevitably make demands on their talent and critical faculties, and also on their „sympathy“ as a noetic principle.

It is no easy problem, of course, to decide which route to take and which methods to adopt. I believe that the most productive approach – and the most legitimate one in that Masaryk himself commended it – might well be to select certain of today’s most burning issues and then try and see how Masaryk himself anticipated, conceived and formulated them, as well as how, and by what paths, he sought to solve them. I would like to demonstrate, with one specific example, how I would conceive such an approach.

II

One of the major problems to be tackled by modern philosophy is the question of „the subject“ (in the sense that the term has assumed since as recently as the last century when it first took on a more permanent meaning, though it has still to be precisely defined, and in fact appears to have suffered some severe shocks over these past years). The problem’s importance derives not solely from theoretical considerations, in other words, it does not reside merely in the difficulty of grasping the concept or idea of „the subject“, „the person“, the „ego“, etc., (even though these very difficulties are of wide-ranging significance), but rather in the constant growth of self-feeling and selfawareness within modern and post-modern humanity (which includes the ordinary people of the present day). The roots of this situation need to be sought above all in the age-old historical impact of certain elements of Christian and even ancient Israelite tradition. In view of this, the efforts of certain leading philosophical currents and schools to question the concept of „the subject“ and move the debate elsewhere (as can be seen, for example, in the case of analytical philosophy or structuralism), might easily appear anachronistic and unrelated to the needs and „spirit“ of the times, as if they derived mostly from the internal intellectual difficulties and technical inadequacies of the conceptual apparatus which, moreover, these particular currents and schools share with the rest of modern thought. It is therefore far from being merely an „internal matter“ of philosophy but rather a problem being thrust on philosophy „from outside“ as it were, and which confronts it regardless or not of whether it has any urge or desire to tackle it.

Another equally serious problem which philosophy has been confronted with „from outside“ is the question of historical evolution (whether history is regarded in the broadest sense, in which case it can imply the evolution of living organisms, etc., or in the narrower sense, in which case we reserve it solely for human society capable of thinking historically). As far as this second problem is concerned, the situation is rather different. By now, almost no one rejects or denies the concept of evolution; philosophical discussions about it are much more restrained and almost extinct (though not always to the same degree). However, as a philosophical problem it has been merely shifted sideways and narrowed down, but not by any means solved (leastways not satisfactorily so).

I am convinced that it will help us gain a deeper insight into Masaryk’s philosophical method and his intellectual strategy if we trace step by step the way in which he not only sought a mutually linked solution to these two problems but also opened a window in them as it were and indicated the way forward to

future philosophical research. And although he himself did not undertake it, he nonetheless entertained no doubts about its importance and even its immediate strategic necessity.

The work in which Masaryk especially stressed the importance of the idea of evolution was „The Social Question“ [Otázka sociální in which he attempted to come to terms, critically speaking, with the Marxism of his day. In it, he pointed out that the issue concerned not solely – or even primarily – the fact of global and social evolution, but chiefly the manner and form of that evolution (in which connection he employed the objectifying term „evolutionary motive forces“, while asserting that Marx and Engels were not justified in claiming inspiration from Darwin since their concept of „evolutionary forces“ differed strongly from Darwin’s). The dialectical solution whereby evolution derives from the tension and conflict of internal contradictions was rejected by Masaryk, on the grounds that he could not accept „objective dialectics“ (in which connection he sarcastically suggested a fur-coat tattoo for keeping out the cold). However it would be wrong to interpret his statement that „there are no dialectical contradictions within things themselves“ as no more than a return to seeking „evolutionary motive forces“ solely „on one side of the contradiction“ so to speak, or as one set of „objective“ forces alongside others, or possibly against them. This will become clear as we go along.

Masaryk maintained that the fundamental question for Marx’s philosophy of history concerned the very source of progress: how were these „motive forces“ of progress to be imagined? In Darwin’s writings themselves, it was evident that they were forces not just of „impulsion“ but also of „perfection“. On this point, Masaryk advanced a decisive argument, to the effect that there was not just one force but many. Masaryk recognised determinism, and causal relationships, but did not understand causality in the old sense of „causa aequat effectum“. Put another way, this means that no cause contains the entire effect, and equally, of course, that no effect is the expression of just one cause. This raised the question as to what was it that combined the action of many causes into a single effect (and equally, the question of how one specific cause could have a whole series of effects, which quantitatively greatly exceeded the „possibilities“ of that particular cause i.e. the problem of the „amplification effect“). Without determinism, no rational human activity would be possible; but nor would it be possible if every action were categorically determined by what preceded it. „Causality in general“ explained nothing and in many ways had become a recent superstition. Generalities in this connection were insufficient. What was required was „not to accept the causal relationship too readily and light-heartedly“, but rather „truly to interpret life’s fullness and social evolution“ in terms of certain causes. In other words, it is necessary to define the precise limits of those causal relationships we know properly, as well as their nature, and how they are concentrated and integrated in the resultant whole, or „totality“.

In this respect, Masaryk was not arguing solely against Marxism but above all against positivism which, he said, „remains a half-truth“. Masaryk regarded the problem of evolution and progress in society and history as a combination of two factors: sociological and metaphysical (by which he understood academic and philosophical). In his view, an academic approach and exposition had necessarily to be combined with philosophy or it would be inadequate. This was because, in the final analysis, the question was to clarify and explain „the meaning of history

and evolution“. Both theory and practice demanded „philosophical guidance in the direction of historical evolution“. „The question of the meaning of history and social life inevitably raises that of the meaning of the world and life in general“. Unlike science, philosophy neither could nor should ever neglect the totality, or lose sight of it even.

Thus Masaryk saw the question of social and historical evolution in the following way: evolution (let alone progress) cannot be explained solely in terms of a single (or even one main) motive social force, or one single principle. „Each single motive force – vis motrix – must be qualified concretely and separately: each single motive force turns out to be a complex of forces“. This begged the question how it was that the action of such a complex of forces could be integrated in the form of specific effects. Masaryk’s explanation was that this function was performed by the human individual as a conscious subject (and he referred at that point to Engels’ „odd“ statement that everything that motivated human action had to pass through the brain). Again, it would be wrong to see this as a concession to subjectivism (on the contrary, Masaryk’s intellectual strategies can provide the basis for a far more radical step, i.e. the cosmologisation of his concept of the subject, much along the lines of the experiments of Max Scheler or Pierre Teilhard de Chardin after the First World War). Masaryk simply pointed out that, in society and history, it was human beings who – both with the help of their consciousness and through its intermediary – integrated not just „subjectively“ (in the sense of „apparently“) but also „really“ in the world-transforming practice of „motive forces“, „causes“ and „laws“ of every possible kind, and thus either enabled the emergence of one meaning or another in history, or not, or could even prevent it. However, Masaryk observed that at this point yet another problem was revealed, or rather the existing problem was clarified in a decisive manner, namely, where was one to seek the basis or guarantee of the subject’s capacity to integrate „objectively“ in terms of consciousness and practice alike, not to mention the basis of the integrity of each and every human being as the subject – the only real subject of history, not only as a physical individual, but particularly as a moral and spiritual personality?

Masaryk took us along that path no further than this clear formulation of the basic question. But it has long been evident that the most important philosophical act is precisely to present a question afresh and more clearly. Actual answers to a question, or attempts at them, are important in so far as they lead us to further, still more important questions. So where does Masaryk’s strategy lead us then? This was the thinker who asked: „What is it that truly motivates people, whether we study them as individuals or as members of a social and historical entity? ... In the final analysis, wherein lies human spiritual activity (...) and even more than activity : spontaneity? What is the extent of that spontaneity, in other words, to what degree are people motivated by their surroundings, destiny or Providence? To what extent are we in charge of our own individual lives and our historical lives? To what extent are we – in a word – free?“

Here again we could misunderstand or mistake his meaning were we to try and interpret the question thus framed as a spring-board to metaphysical speculation. However, such an error could only be made by someone ignorant of Masaryk’s thinking. Part and parcel of the great man’s philosophical legacy is a call for philosophical work (and scholarship in general) to be rooted in practice, and for it to have a practical application. It is when they are confronted with concrete

human situations, where it is a matter of „hic Rhodus, hic salta“ that scholarship becomes truly scholarly, and philosophy most truly philosophical. Just a matter of days before police interrogations brought his life to an early end, Jan Patočka invited the rest of us to join him in consideration and discussion of ways to provide a new and better philosophical grounding for the idea of the inalienability of human rights. We must see this *nervus rerum* of the present-day political, cultural and – above all – moral situation (and not just in our country) as a call to us to assume not only our personal and civic responsibility, but our philosophical responsibility too. And it is my conviction that it is precisely in this great contest of our times that we may rely on Masaryk as a great philosophical strategist, even though it will mean our formulating that strategy in terms of our new conditions – and hence differently. The question of the political subject is part and parcel of the question of the integrity of the moral personality in the midst of historical evolution. However, true personal integrity in our present day situation will be unattainable unless we draw inspiration from our distinguished forebears, of whom one of the most important for Czech philosophers was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk.