

David Runkles:
The Practical Philosophy of T. G. Masaryk

In 1850 Tomas Garrigue Masaryk was born to a poor serf family in Moravia. His mother was a German speaking Czech, his father an illiterate Slovak. But by the time Masaryk finished his career he had been a university philosophy professor, a general, and the first president of the Czech Republic. This paper examines some of the philosophies of this amazing man.

Masaryk is a wonderful synthesis of practical philosophy. His words almost always align with his actions. Vaclav Havel put it this way, "What Masaryk taught, he did; and what he did, he taught (Hodinin)." His philosophy does not deal heavily with theory, it is a philosophy, like Tolstoy, Marx, and parts of Kant, of intense practicality. Above all it is a religious, moral philosophy for governing nations and individual behaviour.

To understand this philosophy more thoroughly, this paper will examine his basic approach to practical philosophy, his religious philosophy, his political philosophy, and his humanitarian philosophy. Though these parts can each be differentiated, like the man and his action, they are closely linked in a system of philosophy with few inconsistencies.

Basic Approach

Four central ideas are clearly seen in Masaryk's basic approach. They are independence, realism, a lack of obsession with new ideas, and a synthesis of feeling and logic.

Masaryk was primarily a truth seeker. In his book Humanistic Ideas he maintains that people are too concerned with what others think and not enough concerned with their own "judgement, personality, individuality." Being individualistic separates one from the influences of others and allows for untainted moral living and examination of truth. Karel Capek repeatedly portrays Masaryk in this way in his celebrated Talks With T.G. Masaryk. Each of Masaryk's actions is deliberately unencumbered by the current popular opinion to which he was constantly subjected.

Masaryk was above all a realist. He considered Marx to be too impractical, materialistic, and negative, ignoring important attributes of humanity. Likewise with Tolstoy, though Tolstoy's idealistic relationship with the Russian peasant class is attractive to many philosophers, Masaryk felt that it was impractical to attempt to ignore human nature and innate need for self-improvement.

Also, in this realistic vein, Masaryk holds that logic and feeling are not mutually exclusive. It would be unreasonable and unnatural to assert that feeling is only a chemical reaction or something to be suppressed as in Kant. However, reason should not be ruled by feeling.

His devotion to realism was so strong that during the political struggles of the last part of the 19th century, he and his colleagues called themselves realists. They eventually began a political party with that name (Capek, 159; Chronology of life).

Masaryk shows no obsession with new ideas as did many of the scientists and philosophers of his day. In his book *Humanistic Ideas* he writes, "Let us not seek profoundly mysterious and new formulae, and final words, for all the perplexities of life. These problems are old as are the solutions. Many of the answers are good and correct."

Religious Philosophy

Masaryk's religious philosophy reflects his basic approach almost perfectly. By examining his thoughts on the nature of God, and faith and reason, one can see that his religious philosophy is closely tied to the rest of his philosophy adding another piece to the consistent whole.

In Capek's *Talks With T.G. Masaryk*, Masaryk expresses his opinion that Providence is not aristocratic, but at the same time indicates that it is something outside each person (p.215). In other words, Masaryk has a monotheistic view of God. At another point in Capek's book, Masaryk says directly that he does not accept pantheism (p.175).

This monotheism is a reflection of Masaryk's realism and tendency toward practicality rather than idealism. Pantheism leads to extremes, such as self-worship and perfect equality of all humanity, that Masaryk would find unreasonable for a healthy functioning society.

This practical reason pervades Masaryk's religion. As a great admirer of the Czech reformation, he felt that the movement demonstrated the reason in religion, not just feeling. He was a special admirer of Chelcicky and Komensky for their educational application of the reason behind religion (Masaryk, Jan Hus). Unlike Kant, he felt that faith was not blind, but based on reason.

Above all, Masaryk felt that religion should be practical. He says in his book *The Social Question*, "And of course we do not need morality and religion in abstracto, in systems and books, but in life, in economics and politics. Ethics is not for study alone, religion not for the church alone."

In the tradition of many of the great reformers he believed in the necessity of political freedom in order to experience true spiritual freedom and development (Capek, p.168). This perhaps grows out of his holistic view of humanity. He sees no contradiction between faith and reason; likewise he sees no contradiction between a holistic society and individuality.

Jan Hus, on the other hand, might disagree with Masaryk on this point. One can guess that, because although Masaryk lived in a time of great religious persecution, he acted as though he was spiritually free. Kant might also disagree with this assertion of Masaryk's about religious and political freedom. For in Kant, freedom is achieved through fulfilling duty, not by existing in a religiously or politically free society.

Political Philosophy

Politics was one of Masaryk's favourite subjects. He wrote often in praise of democracy and in criticism of Marxism. As his religious philosophy, his thoughts are intensely practical.

"Democracy is not only a political system, but a moral one as well - a moral one first of all (Masaryk, Social Question)." This quote sums up Masaryk's thoughts on democracy. Again, for Masaryk, politics must be practical. He feels then that they can't be merely the playground of the elite (Social Question), but must concern all people.

Masaryk is not so simple as to think that a democracy in itself will provide good government. Though admittedly a Platonist, he asserts that institutions are only people and it is good people who make good institutions (Capek p.179). Havel interprets this as Masaryk's emphasis on humans relating to one another with love, applied to politics (Hodonin). The means of this corporate governance is a heritage of Brentano, one of Masaryk's teachers. It is politics from below, by education (Smith p. 13).

Unlike Marx, he does not feel that governments arise out of class struggle or revolution, but that a good government arises by reasonable planning. Masaryk then was a follower of Chelcicky in that he felt that a society without war would be on a superior moral level. But, as always, Masaryk is practical. He feels that peace should be enforced by military strength (Capek, pp.204, 247). Havel calls it a willingness to fight evil in extreme circumstances using extreme measures (Hodonin).

Marxism and Marx himself was a favourite target for Masaryk's political criticism. His attacks were so effective that Lenin is quoted as saying, "Masaryk is my most serious ideological antagonist in Europe (Capek, cover)." Masaryk says that Marxism is too negative, and does not build positively, but only focuses on the preventing of upper class power and neglects the faults of the lower classes (The Social Question). Though he readily recognised the faults of the ruling classes, he did not see that a shift in power would necessarily bring about a better system (Capek pp.162-163).

Masaryk's reaction to Marxism is also based on his Brentanian roots. Politics from below is not uprising, but focused activity, springing from education, in an effort to build a community-like democratic society (Smith p. 14).

Rather than propose a specific political system that would heal the ills of society, he turned to education and brotherly love: his humanitarian philosophy.

Humanitarian Philosophy

The most theoretical portion of Masaryk's practical philosophy is his humanitarian philosophy. Yet somehow he makes his theory more practical than any other parts of his philosophy. It consists of two basic parts - education and love.

Like Komensky, Masaryk believed that moral education including philosophical studies is the foundation of a strong country and healthy people. But he also emphasised the need for political education in order to equip the individual to function as a member of a democracy (Humanistic Ideals).

In *Talks With T.G. Masaryk*, Masaryk asserts that the first and most important learning ground is at home, and by example (p. 59). As always this is a practical holistic approach to education that enforces moral training, but also demands that parents train children by example to be good citizens, hardworking, and reliable, and are therefore forced to retain these qualities in themselves. This also shows, in opposition to Marx, that Masaryk believed that people did not innately possess the tools for building a strong, moral society.

When Masaryk visited Tolstoy at his home in Russia, he became acquainted with Tolstoy's philosophy of simplicity. This philosophy did not require education, but only contentment. Masaryk attacks this philosophy as impractical and simplistic. Education is paramount for maintaining moral integrity (Capek p.150).

If education is the means of building a strong society, love is the basic principle on which that society is built. Masaryk says in *The Social Question*, "The ethic and religion of love is not for Sunday and holidays, but for every day." Love is Masaryk's philosophy simplified so that every person, no matter what station in life, will know how to act toward another.

It is interesting that this principle is quite similar to Kant's categorical imperative, yet on most other points they disagree sharply. Yet, even here Kant and Masaryk differ. In Masaryk, it is possible, and even beneficial to enjoy loving. In Kant, this is not possible, and even harmful. Masaryk emphasises the practicality of loving, and the benefits of doing so as motivation (*The Social Question*). Kant's emphasis, however, is on duty.

One of Masaryk's few inconsistencies lies here in his doctrine of love. As a progressive, Masaryk supported legalising divorce. He felt that by allowing divorce, one made more room for true love to develop, not in a free-love society, but by breaking the bonds of forced or ill-suited marriage (Capek p. 30).

The inconsistency stands in his dual assertion of the type of love society needs. In his thoughts on divorce, he indicates that love is a natural outflow of human nature. However, in *The Social Question* he states, "It must be an effective, energetic love, free of all sentimentality - a muscular Christianity, as the Americans express it." He therefore contradicts himself by saying that love must develop naturally and that it must be forced. It almost comes to a contradiction in humankind's basic nature: good or evil.

Conclusion

Masaryk lived a sort of synthesis of words and deeds, thought and actions. Through his public and private life he strove to apply the principles that he taught.

In examining his approach to philosophy, his religion, his politics, and his humanitarianism, a remarkable synthesis appears. He opposed radical idealism and Marxism, which led to the Second World War and fifty years of communism, both of which devastated his country. Beyond opposing lies, he proposed a practical system for living, based on brotherly love.

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