

Jan Svoboda and Aleš Prázný (eds.):

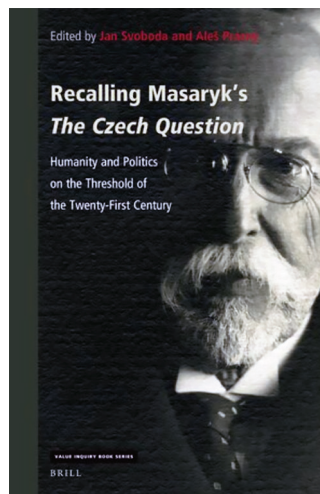
Recalling Masaryk's The Czech Question: Humanity and Politics on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023, 280 pp.

Recalling Masaryk's The Czech Question, edited by Jan Svoboda and Aleš Prázný, offers a profound re-evaluation of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's philosophical and political legacy through a series of essays that revisit the enduring relevance of his seminal work, *The Czech Question*. This collection delves into Masaryk's inquiry into the essence of Czech identity, ethics, and national purpose, situating these within the broader currents of humanity and modern political thought. The issue is highly relevant for Slovaks as well, reflecting the intertwined histories and shared cultural legacies of both nations. The volume is organized into thematic sections, exploring the historical context, ethical foundations, pro-Masaryk and anti-Masaryk perspectives, and the contemporary implications of his ideas, making it a comprehensive resource for understanding Masaryk's enduring impact.

The initial sections of the book, including essays by scholars such as Miroslav Hroch, set the stage by examining the historical backdrop against which Masaryk formulated his ideas. The essays emphasize how Masaryk's notion of "political realism" evolved amidst the challenges of national identity formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Hroch details, Masaryk's early vision aimed at democratizing the Austro-Hungarian monarchical system through gradual federalization. However, the outbreak of World War I prompted a radical shift in Masaryk's strategy, leading to his pivotal role in establishing the Czechoslovak Republic as a modern democratic state in Central Europe.

At the heart of the volume is a sustained engagement with Masaryk's philosophical commitment to ethics as the core of his intellectual framework.



Jan Svoboda's essay, "Modernism and Transcendence from the Perspective of Masaryk's Realism," underscores the primacy Masaryk placed on ethical considerations, arguing that for Masaryk, philosophy's ultimate purpose was to guide moral action both individually and collectively. Svoboda highlights how Masaryk's realism is not confined to a mere acceptance of the status quo but is imbued with a normative vision of what ought to be. This realist perspective seeks to align ethical imperatives with practical realities, suggesting that true progress lies not in abstract ideals but in their concrete application within society. Svoboda's exploration reveals Masaryk's deep conviction that ethical values must underpin all aspects of national life, serving as a guiding force for both personal conduct and political decision-making.

Building on this ethical foundation, Wendy Drozenová's essay, "Masaryk's Ethics," delves into the intricate relationship Masaryk posits between individual morality and national identity. Drozenová elucidates how Masaryk's ethical philosophy extends beyond personal virtue to encompass the moral obligations of the nation as a whole. For Masaryk, the true measure of a nation's greatness lies not in its power or territorial expanse but in its commitment to humanistic and ethical principles. Drozenová's analysis emphasizes that Masaryk envisioned the Czech nation as a moral community, one that derives its legitimacy and purpose from its dedication to universal human values. This vision is particularly resonant in Masaryk's advocacy for an educational system that instills these ethical values in citizens, thus ensuring that the nation's political and cultural achievements are grounded in a shared moral ethos.

Vasil Gluchman's essay, "T. G. Masaryk's Thoughts on Ján Kollár's Idea of Humanity," further enriches the discussion by examining how Masaryk's engagement with Kollár's ideas shaped his understanding of ethics and humanity. Gluchman explores how Kollár's vision of humanity as an evolving, integrative ideal influenced Masaryk's conception of ethical nationalism—one that transcends parochial interests and embraces a broader, pan-human context. According to Gluchman, Masaryk adopted Kollár's belief that each nation contributes uniquely to the tapestry of global humanity, thus situating the Czech Question within a larger moral and philosophical framework. Masaryk's ethical nationalism, as Gluchman argues, rejects chauvinism and instead posits that the Czech nation's mission is to exemplify and promote universal human values such as justice, compassion, and truth.

The volume also addresses the complexities and contradictions in Masaryk's thought, particularly in relation to the critiques presented by his

contemporaries and successors. The sections on the anti-Masaryk perspectives, including critiques grounded in Popper's theory of historicism, illuminate the ongoing debate about the viability of Masaryk's ethical and political ideals in a modern context. Notably, Otakar A. Funda's examination of Masaryk's philosophy through Popper's lens challenges the historicist foundations of Masaryk's views, questioning the applicability of historical narratives as moral guides in contemporary settings. Milan Znoj's discussion of federalism as articulated by Masaryk further complicates the understanding of Masaryk's legacy, revealing the inherent tensions between national sovereignty and broader ethical imperatives in a federal structure.

Additionally, the collection examines the enduring relevance of Masaryk's ideas in contemporary times, particularly in light of the moral and political challenges that confront modern societies. Essays by Karel Hrubý and Jakub S. Trojan reflect on the applicability of Masaryk's humanistic philosophy in the twenty-first century, urging a re-evaluation of his ethical framework as a response to the pervasive relativism and cynicism of contemporary political discourse. Their contributions suggest that Masaryk's call for an integration of ethics into public life is more pertinent than ever, offering a counter-narrative to the disillusionment that often characterizes modern political engagement. Vlastimil Zátka's exploration of Masaryk's idea of enlightened humanism reiterates the potential of Masaryk's ethical vision to serve as a beacon for contemporary debates on human rights and civic responsibility.

Overall, *Recalling Masaryk's The Czech Question* is a thoughtful and rigorous exploration of Masaryk's philosophical legacy, presenting his work as a living discourse that continues to challenge and inspire. The volume's emphasis on ethics as the heart of Masaryk's philosophy invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of his thought for questions of national identity, humanistic politics, and the role of philosophy in public life. The essays by Svoboda, Droženová, Gluchman, and others collectively provide a nuanced understanding of how Masaryk's ethical vision can inform both individual and collective pursuits of justice, making this collection an invaluable resource for those interested in the intersection of ethics, philosophy, and national identity.

By drawing connections between Masaryk's historical context and present-day concerns, the editors provide a compelling case for the relevance of Masaryk's ideas beyond their immediate historical milieu. The essays collectively argue that Masaryk's insistence on the ethical dimension of national existence offers a powerful counterpoint to the instrumental

rationality that often dominates political discourse. In a world increasingly characterized by polarization and a retreat from universal values, *Recalling Masaryk's The Czech Question* serves as a reminder of the transformative potential of an ethics-centred approach to both personal and national life.

This volume not only honours Masaryk's legacy but also reaffirms the critical importance of ethics in shaping the future of societies. Through its rich and varied contributions, it challenges readers to engage deeply with the ethical questions that lie at the heart of human existence, national identity, and political action, making it a must-read for scholars and practitioners alike.

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