



# The transcendental dimension of consciousness in Merab Mamardashvili's philosophy

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## Abstract

In this article I analyze several of Merab Mamardashvili's ideas about the «invisible» and «unknowable» nature of consciousness, as conveyed by the term «non-objectifying». The main points at issue here are: (1) the idea of the fundamental non-objective nature of consciousness, and (2) the impossibility of constructing a naturalist ontology that would take the experience of consciousness into account. The term non-objectiveness assumes not only the non-physicality of consciousness, but also the logical impossibility of positively and affirmatively apprehending consciousness in terms of standard subject-object determinations. Consciousness is not an object; moreover, consciousness cannot “appear”, though it allows things and the world to appear. In the article, I show how Mamardashvili dedicated a significant amount of his philosophical work to conveying this intuition. This intuition, in turn, is predicated on the fact that the paradoxical nature of consciousness can be considered in terms of the idea of “transcendentality”. With this in mind, I offer an interpretation of the concept of the transcendental, predicated on a justification in which I apply the concept to consciousness. I also show how Mamardashvili's philosophical method can be viewed as a special form of transcendentalism, in which Mamardashvili elaborated an authorial stance that was both unique to his philosophical outlook and which he combined with the traditional ideas of this philosophical position.

**Keywords** Phenomenology · Philosophy of consciousness · Merab Mamardashvili · Philosophy of Mamardashvili · Transcendentalism · Russian philosophy of the Soviet period

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## Introduction

I would like to begin my discussion by citing a passage from Mamardashvili's celebrated work *Consciousness and Symbol*:

Consciousness (*soznanie*) is not knowledge (*znanie*), it is *with*-knowledge (*so-znanie*); it is that in which we know something else, but without knowing the thing in which we know it; it is something that accompanies knowledge and while we find knowledge in that and nowhere else, what it is (that is, it is something) we do not know. We cannot *with*-knowledge (*soznanie*): that is, we cannot turn consciousness itself into an object. And this is the additional dimension of the unknowable, of the invisible, for we cannot see consciousness. We can see the content of consciousness, but we never see consciousness itself. (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1971, p. 364)

How should we understand Mamardashvili's statement here? He implies that we cannot speak about consciousness in the same way as about a standard object of research or investigation. More likely, consciousness cannot be turned into an object at all. Despite naturalistic approaches to consciousness, for Mamardashvili, consciousness is not "a thing". However, how then do we comprehend when we effortlessly affirm our own consciousness, or that of any other being? What are we missing when we adhere to this self-explanatory truism? What essential things do we overlook by considering consciousness as a transparent medium which can be ignored, concentrating instead on objects themselves and attempting to turn into an object when it comes to mind? Consciousness is never an object and, moreover, consciousness never appears to us, although it allows things and the world to appear. The entire philosophical work of Mamardashvili in many respects was focused on communicating this very intuition. The performative ways in which Mamardashvili presented his philosophical views were more than a mere formality: in its own right, it was a special form of phenomenology.

Below, I will examine Mamardashvili's approach. I will show how his phenomenology insists on the extra-natural (or, as he put it, the 'non-natural') character of consciousness. Foremost in this idea is the thesis of the invalidity of the objectifying approach to consciousness, systematically overlooking what is essentially the transcendental character of any phenomenology. Consciousness is not a thing or object. It is that which, coming before objects and things, somehow makes possible a conversation about them. Consciousness is best introduced by the well-known formula of Immanuel Kant who described the nature of the transcendental as the "condition of possibility" of objects and thus cannot be discovered as yet one more object<sup>1</sup> (Kant 1998, p. 668).

The phenomenological approach of Mamardashvili is interesting because of its emphasis on the extra-natural, non-objectifying, and the non-empirical character of

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<sup>1</sup> Every transcendental proposition, however, proceeds solely from one concept, and states the synthetic condition of the possibility of the object in accordance with this concept.

consciousness. Below I will examine the argumentation and philosophical motivation that lies at the foundation of his approach.

## The principle of objectification

Despite the fact that in Russian philosophy of the Soviet period the term “naturalism” was rarely used, the naturalistic principle itself was actively applied in philosophy. In its most generalized version, naturalism simply denies the reality of the mental, or at least insists on an identification of the mental with the physical. The real is that which is extensive, or in more contemporary terms, that which is measurable. For naturalism, the real denotes any objectification. Real is that which is or can be an object. But how do we understand the object? If we intend to use the pair of semantic concepts “material” and “idea”, then an object can be something that is completely ideal. What definition, then, of the object can be most effective for naturalism and its opponent? The object is that which can be observed or imagined without the properties or attributes that constitute the object itself. In other words, the object can be separated from the observer or the observation process itself. This is that which can be posited *before* thought or perception, while keeping a clear boundary between the observer and the observation (if you will, the subject) and the observed (essentially, the object). In this way the definition of the object in naturalism will be, in its own way, dispositional. Aspects such as “materiality” or “idealness” recede into the background, opening up the space for the property of the total separation of the observable (the thinkable) from the non-observable (the unthinkable). The object in its broadest sense is some kind of ‘what’ or some ‘substance’ which can be separated and isolated.

With these basic definitions, we can now consider how consciousness is conceived by Merab Mamardashvili. In doing so we will attempt to understand in what sense his approach to consciousness challenges the naturalist approach, and also where lies the originality of the phenomenology of consciousness he developed. Of great interest on this path is the extent to which his arguments preserve their significance for a variety of debates between naturalists and transcendentalists in contemporary philosophy of consciousness.

## The critique of naturalism in the philosophy of consciousness

In their well-known work “Symbol and Consciousness”, Merab Mamardashvili and Alexander Pyatigorsky suggest a criticism of the possibility of the creation of positive and naturalist theories of consciousness, precisely those theories where consciousness is given as some kind of object about which one can discuss from a genus-species position or subject-object dualism. The central thought of these authors resides in the fact that it is not possible to speak “about” consciousness, and this seriously upsets the plans of those who intend to create different theories of consciousness. The main argument supporting the proposition that consciousness cannot be made into an object of theoretical reasoning is that from transcendental

intuition, and it is, broadly speaking, a classical phenomenological argument. Only with the help of consciousness itself can we discover something. It is this initial step beyond which any other steps are impossible. Here there is a certain boundedness (finitude) or a foundational nature, about which several branches of philosophy customarily speak. It is not simply an initial step. It also fits into the well-known definition of the transcendental by Kant: “knowledge, which is occupied not so much with objects, as with the mode of our knowledge of objects...” (Kant 1998, p. 206). This underlying formulation captures the first rule of transcendentalism: one cannot ignore the conditions which make possible the experience we have. The most important thing in these conditions is that *they always precede* what is given; in this lies their fundamental original nature. It is in this sense that consciousness for Mamardashvili is fundamentally original. I will call this feature of consciousness *primordial*. Actually, *primordial* is a classic term for the phenomenology itself (Husserl 1982). If we find ourselves in the world of things, then before that, we know that we have found ourselves in the world of consciousness. As Mamardashvili explains, any attempt in a deterministic fashion to restore initial conditions already contains within itself, in a concealed fashion, those very same initial conditions. (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1997, p. 335). Only through consciousness are things proffered to us. But if this is so, then putting oneself ahead of it, attempting to define consciousness itself, is impossible. Consciousness does not detect itself as a thing. What is essential in this judgement is not its non-physical nature but the fact that it neither objectifies itself as a thing nor as an idea. Its position to us, to the bearers of consciousness itself, paradoxically coincides with us. One cannot move it away and one cannot remove oneself from it. One cannot relate to it insofar as one cannot give up thinking about it. It is fused with the observer and at the same time the observer is aware of his own consciousness. He knows that he is conscious, and is therefore conscious of his own consciousness. The fact that we know about our consciousness could encourage us to maintain that it can be objectified. However, this is not the case. Knowledge of our consciousness permits us to say that it exists. If this were not the case, then no conversations about consciousness (neither asserting nor denying its existence) would be possible. But does its ‘objectness’ automatically follow from its existence? If *something* exists does it mean that this *something* is an object (thing, substance)? It is precisely against these linkages that a critique of naturalism emerges, since naturalism always insists on the existence of similar linkages. All that we read in Mamardashvili, in the pages jointly written with Pyatigorskij, indicates his intuition of a disjunction of the connections between the existence of consciousness and grasping it as some object (thing or substance). “We cannot ‘consciousness’ (that is turn the particle con (with) in the term con-consciousness turn into an object. And it is this which is the extra dimension of the unknowable, the invisible, for we cannot see our consciousness. We see the content of consciousness, but we never see consciousness” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1971, p. 364).

Therefore, the creation of a traditional theory of consciousness is presented with two main difficulties. First, any attempt to describe it “already contains within it precisely those conditions and means whose very origin need to be explained” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1997, p. 45). Second, in order to recognize consciousness, one needs to suspend it. “Consciousness becomes knowledge and at that moment

it ceases to be consciousness...” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1971, p. 364). I will return later to these difficulties. The theory of consciousness encounters difficulties because this theory presumes the separation of objects. Most theories are built around the simplistic division between subject and method. The theory must have a subject to which a method is applied. This being said, the subject matter must not be reduced to the method. But if the subject matter begins to be superimposed on the method, effectively coinciding with it, then the theory is built on some paranormal grounds. It is precisely such a paranormality of any theory of consciousness which is revealed by Mamardashvili. In connection with this, he calls our attention to the necessity of abandoning the rhetoric of explanatory strategies in relation to consciousness. As a rule, it is precisely this explanatory approach which cannot avoid reference to the separation of subject matter and method. To explain is to show the causal relationship between one and the other. We explain something when we reproduce the connection between concepts or phenomena. Besides this the explanation assumes genus-species processes. To explain is finding the genus in the species or embedding the species in the genus. Yet in relation to consciousness neither of those procedures are feasible. Consciousness has no genus for it cannot be superseded. Equally, finding a causal sequence leading to the generation of consciousness as consequence overlooks the point made above, that before consciousness there is nothing, it is substantial in the classical philosophical sense insofar as it starts always and only from itself.

## Dualism in consciousness and the danger of naturalization

I have alluded to the difficulty regarding the objectivization of consciousness, such as the need for a “suspension”. If one attempts to make consciousness the subject of examination then “at that moment it ceases to be consciousness” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1971, p. 37)

Essentially this thesis relates the criticism of the classical theory of reflection which dates back to Descartes and the majority of new European philosophers. According to this classical conceptualization, reflection is a passive mirroring, adding and subtracting precisely nothing and only registering the work of consciousness in its original form. The magical function of consciousness resides in its ability to turn itself into an object and remain as the conscious agent, not alien but belonging alongside of consciousness. Contesting this naïve position of Western epistemology, Mamardashvili purposefully introduced the concept of “the sphere of consciousness”. Discounting the conditionality of forced terms and models, we will try to understand what is assumed by this concept. As Mamardashvili writes, the “subject-object” dualism is not the primary schema for speculation. This is constituted by another abstract synthesizing schema—the sphere of consciousness. The sphere of consciousness is not some kind of subject, understood as the universal foundation of observation as part of the reflexive process, but including both properties of an object as it does properties of a subject. This is a certain relationship to oneself that is devoid of duality.

In classical philosophy, consciousness was understood as a certain object, that which belongs to man (to the subject), for whom the possession of consciousness with all its givens is the most reliable of starting points. Consciousness (*soznanie*) can be defined as the means of self-reflection. Con-sciousness (*so-znanie*) exists when there is a duplication of registered knowledge. It is not sufficient to know; one must *know that one knows*. Reflection is introduced as some unique ability *to be transparent for oneself*. Transparency signifies that consciousness is given to oneself such as it is, “in truth” without distortions of any kind. Encountering the awkward question “in what way can consciousness be the topic of research?” the answer of philosophers presumed an appeal to the “miraculous” properties of reflection. Unfortunately, these theses are subject to a number of paradoxes. It is to these very paradoxes that Mamardashvili directs our attention.

The main challenge of the attribution of dual properties of reflection resides in the fact that dualism, if not on the first step, then on its second, turns consciousness into an object. While it may not be immediately noticed, the subject-object dualism successfully becomes part of our everyday attitudes and expectations of common sense. But, already at the second step, that which is in the consciousness of every reflexive act begins to be thematized in terms of objectness, and we encounter the difficulties described above.

It is in this connection that Mamardashvili proposes the concept of the “sphere of consciousness” which is introduced by him as a way of resolving the paradoxes of classical theories of consciousness. According to his interpretation, one can deliver a more universal way to describe consciousness than that of methodological dualism. The first thing that we encounter when we observe the experience of consciousness is that the structure of events in consciousness is different than the structure of events in the external (physical) world. We cannot describe the events of consciousness with the help of the “subject-object schema”; we are also unable to apportion them to such concepts as “substance” and “phenomenon”. In classical philosophy, from which Mamardashvili diverges, only substance possesses a real existence, whereas a phenomenon is something fictitious, or as we would say nowadays, “virtual”, owing its existence to something else, that is, essentially, not possessing its own existence. In the event of consciousness, it is not possible to separate substance from a phenomenon. A phenomenon acquires its own independent existence, it has no need for any other substance for its own existence. Under such conditions, it becomes a special phenomenon. The event (or condition) of consciousness have a phenomenal structure. What is a phenomenon? A phenomenon is a certain integral formation of consciousness which cannot be further deconstructed and is not in need of explanation through something else. For example, when I see a façade from the window of a neighbouring house, then this fact is a phenomenon of consciousness. The phenomenon is self-sustained and thus in phenomenology is accepted as “put into brackets of” the external world with a sharp focus on the realities of consciousness.

The points mentioned above are directly related to a further consideration of Mamardashvili’s phenomenology, namely with the revision of the classical understanding of *reflection as mirroring*. It is a question of doubts about the properties of consciousness’ ability to maintain neutrality in relation to itself. Under

this marvelous quality, philosophy usually assumed the ability of consciousness to observe its own work, that is, basically, the ability to conduct a self-evaluation. Fundamental in this self-observation is the passivity of the mirroring function—it neither adds nor subtracts anything, but only registers the work of consciousness in its primitive form. This situation corresponds to that which served as a significant rationale of classical philosophy, according to which “the most loyal benchmark for any phenomenon of consciousness is the fact of consciousness” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1971, p. 47)

According to this thesis, it was assumed that consciousness had a direct experience of itself, that is, provided that condition about which it can state with confidence that it knows its motives. Indeed, it is this classical move which is brought into question by Mamardashvili. The condition of every conscious act comprises those acts that are taken outside of consciousness and remain inaccessible for reflection. The point at issue is that there exists a certain “non-objectifying balance” in thought which, essentially, is thought itself. One can easily convince oneself about what has been stated: one finds it difficult to give a clear answer to the simplest question of how we think. In most cases, it all comes down to a tautology. Thought is described with the aid of thought itself. When one sees a thing then, of course, one understands that it is precisely *he or she* who sees it. However, we do not see *how* we see, we do not understand *how* we understand. Is it possible to create an algorithm which would lay out the procedure of understanding in such a way that it could be reproduced by someone else or even by ourselves? This seems to be problematic. Rather it appears as though we should have said that understanding happens to us.

In this regard, Mamardashvili writes:

We think that the things that are generated in our head, by way of some elemental flow, have *come into our head...* [In fact,] thinking in a real sense is not a process of thinking that thinks by itself, but is generated on some coordinated and concentrated foundations, at the source of which you yourself are located... Thus, we encounter some non-compositional conditions of thought, whereby “to think” implies knowing that it is so. (Mamardashvili 2000, p. 47)

For example, when we are tasked with solving a mathematical problem and successfully carry out the task, we can often only explain our answer by duplicating the problem—rather than providing an adequate explanation for the solution. In other words, *under the guise of explaining the process of thinking, thinking is already set in motion*. Once again, we can point to a solution, or final outcome, but we are hard pressed to uncover the origin of thought—to justify its “solution”. At the same time, we can remember our understanding but not experience the understanding itself. In this case we can say that understanding comes to us. The language is quite indicative. When we say that the “ideas came into our head” we attempt to transmit the intuition of a sensation of ourselves as passive contemplators of the work of our consciousness which is inaccessible and only marginally under our control. In describing the work of consciousness, it is always a question of being carried out only in the *postfactum* modus as something that has already taken place. To emphasize this, Mamardashvili adopts a special term known as “the fact of consciousness”. The fact

is that which happens on its own accord and which can only be taken unawares by an observer who is able to state a fact but is unable to change it.

Moreover, many mental operations which we produce, from the habit of speech to our counting skills, are simply not recognized by us. For example, it is hard to dispute that we do not refer to the rules of language (grammar) when we speak, and yet, on the whole, we speak correctly in our native tongue. Finally, when we perform any intellectual work, we feel that we have an indirect relation to what is happening. The mental process seems to follow its own laws. In some sense this process has a subject-less character. Tasks are resolved, poems are remembered, sentences formed, images drawn and so on.

It is curious that the intention to preserve subject-object dualism in consciousness effectively leads to the application of the dualist paradigm to consciousness itself, and the latter, in turn, easily flows into naturalism. Any conversion of consciousness into an object ultimately presumes an ontology where apart from “consciousness” there is “not-consciousness”, and taking the position of “not-consciousness” one can undertake a search for consciousness. The world, it turns out, is represented by two dimensions (just as the Cartesian ontology was composed), and one could alternately adopt one dimension and then the other. It is doubly paradoxical that in a similar ontology the capacity of an oscillatory migration is assigned to the subject. He, as the presumed bearer of consciousness, can, nevertheless, begin with the assertion of things as non-present in his consciousness, and then proceed to the question how and where within the world of things can consciousness be located. This question usually appears in the following form: how can there emerge mental facts among physical facts? This question already has a fully naturalist charge to it, but it arises from a simple division of the world into “consciousness” and “non-consciousness” and a previous one into “consciousness of consciousness” or the “conscious agent” and “the conscious object”. Such a split has significant naturalistic potential. A confirmation of this is provided by the fact that the Cartesian model of consciousness serves as the starting point for the majority of contemporary theories of consciousness of the analytical school where there is a strong naturalistic premise, even when it concerns theories critically disposed to the clear reductionism of consciousness or the diverse forms of physicalism.

It seems that the critical attitude of Mamardashvili about subject-object dualism addresses this naturalist scenario of the dualistic model. It is precisely the conversion of consciousness into an object which provokes the search for a causal link between consciousness and the body, reductionism in the explanation of consciousness (by virtue of a reduction to the functions of the brain) and any other strategies, beginning with the knowledge of the world of things, eliding, in such a case, consciousness itself, in which and for which these things are proffered.

## **I think there where I do not think**

How do the level of reflection and the level of pre-reflective thinking (pre-reflective cogito) correlate with each other? In the opinion of Mamardashvili, they are entirely irrelevant to each other and moreover ‘not transparent for interpenetration’.



Their disposition is such that reflection is not a neutral but an active process which through its intervention *changes* consciousness. “One can approach consciousness in a non-conscious way or in a conscious way. When taking a non-conscious approach, consciousness is considered a case of mirroring (*otrazheniya*) or awareness; that is, consciousness itself acts as a special cognitive process. In this case consciousness remains “in its place”, and “nothing is done” with it. But here we are presuming something else. We proceed from the somewhat crazy supposition, that at that moment, now, in this time when we talk about the problem of consciousness, when, as we say, “we work with consciousness”, we already in some way exclude it from a certain spontaneous, natural process” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1971, pp. 23–24).

Mamardashvili claims that when we really think, there are no witnesses to our experience of thought. In turn, as soon as witnesses appear, our thought ceases. From here one can make a fairly paradoxical conclusion: consciousness is a deeply unconscious process. We might liken it to setting up a date with oneself: even if we turn up at the designated place and time, we are bound to discover that consciousness has already left. Among attempts to understand “how consciousness works”, we change processes which run completely autonomously. Putting it crudely, we can say that it does not work like it worked “in actual fact” while in our presence. The distinctiveness of consciousness lies in the fact that while attempting to describe it we eliminate the conditions of its existence. We introduce an “uncontrolled disturbance” into the ongoing process. What is happening can be compared to a situation where I am trying to see a place where I am not. When I am not there then how can I see it, and when I am there it is no longer a place where I am not. There exist less sophisticated examples: for example, our inability to see our whole body just as we see the bodies of other people also serves as a good illustration of how consciousness is organized. We do not see our body as a whole because our eyes belong to our own body. In the same way, consciousness is not subject to explanation in so far as explanation belongs to consciousness. Resorting to the well-known statement of Wittgenstein about the eye, which does not see itself in the process of vision (we see that the eye sees but we do not see the vision of the eye, for these capacities have a dimension of length, but do not have a dimension of recourse to oneself) one can remark that if the eyes could see itself in the visual process then we would always see only that eye and not the things around us. If we want to make the eye the object of research then we are obliged to remove it, provisionally depriving it of its visual functions and place it in a test-tube. The general sense of the problematic nature of attribution of consciousness as a descriptive principle expresses itself in the fact that taking a position where things are looked *at*, we lose the position *from where* people look.

In a phenomenological manner one can say the following about this: when the subject attempts to formalize the manner of its constitution, to reveal the mechanism, to describe the structure, procedure, the machinery responsible for the work of constituting consciousness, it comprehends *nothing*. All that which is grasped in this act of turning on itself by the conscious agent proves to be empty of significance. A plan to objectify the ‘constituting mechanisms’ of consciousness becomes the constitution of “nothing”. What is even more evident is the principle of the intentional

targeting of the object: in motion we yearn to grab the very intention as the object of an intentional act, the object of whose movement turns out to be “nothing” or, more accurately, the absence of any object.

Ultimately, the essence of those difficulties which Mamardashvili has in mind consist of the fact that the classical ways of describing consciousness always run up against something which evades reflection. In order to resolve these difficulties, it is necessary to renounce any claim to the full understanding characteristic of classical philosophy. Contrary to the postulates of classical philosophy, no primacy of reflection exists. Consciousness, arguably, has no magical ability to mirror itself. The potential for manifesting itself is not bound to any such fantastic capacity. Indeed, quite the opposite. It is precisely non-reflective consciousness which makes reflection possible. Mamardashvili assumes that there is some pre-reflective cogito which also constitutes the condition of what is called the Cartesian cogito in the classical paradigm. That is, the condition of any conscious act is constituted by those acts which have been undertaken without any type of reflection and remain unmirrored in consciousness. The pre-reflection cogito antedates the Cartesian cogito, and a certain “non-objectifying balance” in thought and is its most important active mainspring. “Moreover, the very I-cogito as a living, non-verbal knowledge and activeness, an ontological existence in a common virtual field of uninterrupted and endlessly lengthy generation, shows much more similarity with a certain ‘third’ than to the two substances known to us. So, is not the cogito that special location (topos), whose matter is also distinctive?... Descartes only warns: for us it is a kind of incomprehensible “third substance”. We know it as fact, but for us it is impenetrable and we cannot understand it” (Mamardashvili 1993, p. 44).

To further clarify his idea, Mamardashvili introduces the concept of the “state of consciousness”. The state of consciousness denotes those operations of consciousness which lead to its productivity but that are not themselves subject to awareness. They are not located “within” the psychic act for they are not at all immanent to the psyche. Reflection can be situated in the “state of consciousness” which reflection itself cannot grasp. If I understand something, then those laws through which my understanding occurs, cannot be understood, they cannot become the content of my experience of understanding. Understanding is not grasped by understanding though there is a fundamental projective consequence. This means that it allows to see itself as an outcome but not as an internal process: understanding always arrives with some delay. When the work of consciousness is conducted and completed, it is given to us as a consequence, the possession of which does not allow us to conclude about how it was obtained. It is precisely in this circumstance where the notion of the “state of consciousness” is designed to draw our attention. It “permits us to work on that side of our existence, which cannot be the object (nor the subject!) of any scientific consideration. Insofar of all that which is in the psyche cannot be considered objectively and to the extent that it cannot be considered objectively there exists consciousness, then in the psyche, all which appears as beyond our consciousness, may be associated with consciousness by way of its condition by introducing the category of the ‘state of consciousness’” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorskij 1971, p. 64). Despite the fact that we cannot make the work of consciousness transparent, consistently thinking through its every nook and cranny, we nonetheless sense

that within us *understanding has occurred*. “Therefore, any really performed act of thought can be considered as an *event*. An event which differs from its own content. Apart from the fact that a thought affirms some content, the very fact of affirming and envisioning this content is an event. The event of thought supposes that I should fulfil my role as a thinking being. Moreover, an element of this event is, for example, also that which Kant calls an ‘idea of reason’. It would seem a strange thing. Or, *a propos*, on a related note, in Proust there exists a wonderful *lapsus*: he calls reason endless sensation. It would seem very strange, why is reason a sensation? Usually we differentiate these things. But here it seems that it refers to precisely that event-like dimension, a dimension of these events of the ordering of thoughts in which the condition of thoughts, occurring, nevertheless cannot be imitated, artificially repeated and extended by thought and are in this sense absolute” (Mamardashvili 1988, pp. 57–58)

If this did not exist, we would not be able to authenticate our understanding, register it as a fact. Meanwhile, such an experience is still accessible to us: Mamardashvili also ascribes it to the “state of consciousness”. Essentially, it provides the opportunity of “transmitting consciousness into the sphere of accessible experience. Just as in psychoanalysis, in principle the sphere of the unconscious inaccessible to direct experience symbolically becomes indirectly accessible, by virtue of a special reading of the texts arising in psychoanalytic sessions. If one speaks of the psyche as the text of consciousness, then one may conclude: ‘the state of consciousness’ is the possibility of the interpretation of consciousness of the psyche as itself” (Mamardashvili 1988, p. 55)

## The ethical dimension of consciousness

One of the identifying features of the objectlessness of consciousness is its non-integralness in the object-logic of the material world. The consciousness is transcendental in the sense that it organizes the manifestation of the world as object-based (material or abstract) but it itself can in no way be manifested as an object, whether that be a thing or an abstract concept.

Above we have described consciousness more as an absence: it, as it were, does not exist but due to it everything else does. One grasps its nature at that moment when we attempt to find consciousness within things and understand that it cannot be here just as a place in the hall of a theatre cannot simultaneously be a part of the stage. Consciousness, according to Mamardashvili, is that transcendental condition which, being closest to us, can never be found in the world as something differing from us. Therefore, to speak of it as an object (or even in general as *about something*) is impossible. Consciousness is that *through which* and not that *which*. Consciousness is more aptly to be described as a certain *how*, and not as a certain *what*. Probably the most vivid metaphor which is suggested is the metaphor of light: consciousness can be seen as analogous to light, through which we can see everything, but without seeing light itself.

Astonishingly, if we nevertheless immerse ourselves into the world of things and focus on its own inner logic and then return once again to the issue of consciousness

then one can discover the *excess of consciousness*, its ‘non-obligatoriness’, for the world of things. From the natural perspective, consciousness of the world is not needed, in no way is it included in natural process. Consciousness occurs in nature as an unnatural formation not derived from pre-existing natural properties and qualities and not reducible to them.

We have no satisfactory theory which would explain why in the world there exists such an amazing property of having the capability to know about itself and having an inner dimension.

The human being is a being who is, simultaneously, constrained by a cause and effect chain and at that same time is encountered elsewhere where some human conditions are born for which there is no natural mechanism. Philosophy, or thought, exists only because we are not born in a natural way; it is the necessary element of that organ through which the human is born in us, although it is impossible to define it. It is born on certain unnatural, non-mechanic and non-automatic foundations and party to this birth is something that we call thought. In effect, I wish to say the following: in order to think, something must occur in us that is not at the same time a phenomenon of nature in and of itself. (Mamardashvili 2000, p. 6)

When Mamardashvili speaks about the special essence of consciousness, he intends to separate it from the world: i.e., to reject phenomenological laws stipulating the fundamental intentionality of consciousness, or to replace the radical primordially of consciousness. Consciousness is always oriented towards something, but the absence of such consciousness is not a given. Consciousness always continues as an “on-going process of consciousness”, and we have no experience that can move ahead of consciousness. But this, unfortunately, does not offer us any answers to pressing existential questions, just as it does not offer clarity on the lingering question of “why is there something rather than nothing?” Simply from the consciousness’ orientation towards objects, or the transcendental work of consciousness that makes this world transcendently understandable, still does not follow any existential understanding, nor does it provide any sense of comfort. I shape this world, but I do not understand it. I live in the world made under my transcendental demands, but I am still uncomfortable in it. The world is located in my space and my time, but I am at a loss in this world and keep asking myself: what is the point of this time and space? Why am I here? Why am I the way I am? Why is my transcendental dimension this particular one? Why do I have so many categories? I may have created this world but why should I now live in it? Did I really choose when I created this world? Did I have any choice at all?

In the Mamardashvili’s quote provided above, we read about the non-automatic, unnatural and non-mechanical dwelling of man in the world. If the world is mine, why do not I flow from it; why do not I fit into its logic? The answer to this question may be that special meaning of the transcendental philosophy of consciousness, which Mamardashvili was fumbling to explain. His logic allows us to speak of a special transcendental anthropology, of an exclusively transcendental nature inherent in man, humanity, and the human in man. This is the logic of a fundamentally inner fracture and schism, the absence of any original common source for man

and the world which could reconcile them in their existence. Man is the one whose existence and thought is described by the logic of “contrary to”. In the world without man there are not those meanings which organize this world as human, and humans are gifted with such understanding. In the world there are neither metaphysics, nor values, nor meaning but in it there is man who always sees this world through metaphysics (consciously or not), values or meaning. The originality of Mamardashvili’s transcendentalism is described by the following thesis: I know exactly how the world should be, though I do not find it like that. We have a sufficiently distinct image (not objectifying and not grasped in terms of positive knowledge) of what the world should be, although nowhere in the world do we find the realization of this image. After ascertaining this, we can act in two ways, and we are fundamentally free in our choice of path. One can either rely on the logic of the world, which does not mean that we have forgotten or do not know the transcendental metrics constituting human profundity. Or we can try to follow the transcendental metrics, which will not mean that we have ceased to notice the difference between the world and the transcendental image. In this sense, from the perspective of the transcendental nature of consciousness, both choices will turn out to be analogous—they will both be based on awareness of the mismatch between “is and ought”. There will be differences, however, in terms of practical dwelling in the world. In one case we will systematically direct our attention to the effects of that which is shaped by the transcendental. In the other case it will be directed to the transcendental itself. The first characterizes our consciousness in the modus of our everyday mindset, and the second of a philosophical mindset. However, in both cases, man systematically goes beyond the natural order of events. He is guided, in his understanding of the world, by that which does not exist in it. That is why the world is not given to us as something so close and domesticated that it would prevent us from noticing the difference between natural and non-natural (the is and ought). Nor can we perceive the world in its captured non-transcendentalized nature. Such a world would completely lose any clarity for us. Therefore, it is more likely the case that the world becomes understandable through our efforts. And this situation can neither eliminate the sensation of effort, nor allow us to encounter the world while eluding such effort. Man equips his world in the mode “as if”, but the irrevocability of the condition does not allow him to merge with this world, to become “his own” in it, this connection is always against nature, as is the very fact of human existence in the world.

Mamardashvili constantly underscores the opposition of consciousness to the natural order of things. The *ethical dimension of consciousness* is clearly discernible in this opposition. Behavior not proceeding from circumstances and expectations, and in part contra-distinct to these, is usually thought of by us as ethical. This is an important topic which follows from the work of Mamardashvili and without which it would be difficult to fully understand his transcendental interpretation of the theory of consciousness.

When Mamardashvili writes: “There is no natural reason, no natural sequence of events that would generate thought in a person” (Mamardashvili 2000, p. 82) or says that “thought is effort” (Mamardashvili 2000, p. 47) then, apparently, he has in mind that consciousness is involved in the realm of values and not facts. Here, clearly Christian topics resonate, according to which *to understand* means always

to understand the difference between *good* and *evil*. If we do not understand this distinction, then we do not understand at all. These are the fundamental conditions of the possibility of understanding and consciousness. Hence, consciousness has a value-based nature. It is this property which makes it possible to detect in the world that which does not exist in it, that which is not manifested in it as a matter of fact, in the guise of facts or things, in the guise of what is. There are no values in the world, they are introduced by humans and through them the world is understood by them. If a person utters the phrase “this city will never be the same to me again”, then his friend may ask nervously: “what happened?” although this deeply linguistic phrase only communicates the difference in perception of one and the same object, the city. For example, this is how an artificial intelligence program will evaluate the meaning of this phrase. A person is usually able to see such meanings that are not literally pronounced. As a rule, we call this capacity the understanding or consciousness. If we look closely at the nature of obtaining these meanings, then it will be a value-based one. But it is precisely the ethical which eludes the world of natural objects and things. Therefore, to be an ethical being, as well as a conscious one, according to Mamardashvili, means acting contrary to nature, systematically falling out of the actual state of affairs determined by circumstances. After all, if you think about it, the conversation from the perspective of what is not and not from what is, is what we call understanding. But this very quality is that which we assume to be at the basis of the ethical. There are no ideals in the natural world but adhering to them as if they were fully real is the essence of ethical intuition. The contradistinction of such concepts as “the natural order of things” (“natural causality”) and “consciousness” (“the human”, “the historical”, “the cultural”), is necessary for Mamardashvili to show that a human being is constituted by means of special connectedness with such an order of ideas and values which exceed his current situation in the world. Simply put, this is a question about the “dimensions” of ideals, goodness, justice, truth. A person has a stable intuition about their meaning but one which never appears in the world in all its “obvious” fullness. However, a person not only has an idea of what does not exist in the empirical world (so in the empirical world there is good, but there is no absolute good, there is justice, but there is no absolute justice, etc.), he is also guided by these ideals, “aligns” himself according to these principles, acting *as if they were entirely real* in the empirical world too. Mamardashvili suggests a certain formula: man is a creature for whom *the ideal is real*. Following on from this, the philosopher affirms that to be human means to be a being involved in the order of ideas and values that exceed his current position. But for this one needs “effort”, one needs tension (Mamardashvili often talks about the “muscles of thoughts”) (Mamardashvili 2000, pp. 56, 61) because by and of itself this experiment is not completed.

However, if having in mind the effort which brings together the ethical and the conscious, we assign all the activity to ourselves, then we are also mistaken. The transcendental nature of consciousness which this article is concerned with, precisely points to a certain retarding character of our consciousness. Consciousness, or more precisely the experience of thought, is the condition of meaningful spontaneity. There is no algorithm that would necessarily lead us to the point of understanding. The experience of consciousness is the experience of the so-called “already consciousness”, in that my existence as a conscious being means that

my consciousness is always ahead of me. In this vein, Mamardashvili uses the term “indivisibility” (Mamardashvili 2000). The metaphor of “indivisibility” designates that in the situation of understanding of oneself, one can capture only the *already*-understood nature of something. When we think, we always encounter ourselves in the process of thought, but never go from the step of not-thought to thought (Gasparyan 2014, p. 156). Above, I have already written about the fact that thinking as it were bears a subject-less character. It is impossible to evoke understanding within oneself, one can only wait for it. When performing intellectual actions, I must passively register the emergence of acts of understanding that occur with me (with my participation). This leads to one significant conclusion: the fact that no methodical or logical sequence of steps taken on the way to understanding can necessarily lead us to it. We can significantly increase our chances by manifesting assiduousness in thinking, but we will never acquire any guarantees. If we understand something, then it means we have *already* understood it. In Mamardashvili’s logic, the way of entering into thought should be a part of thought from the very beginning (Stafecka 2007).

How do we apply the idea of the “indivisibility” of thinking to the rationality of a moral act? From Mamardashvili’s point of view, just as in the situation of thinking, the determination of the commission or non-commission of an act is not derived from anywhere. There is no algorithm by which we can come to a moral act. In the situation where we have *already-chosen-the-good*, one can only take oneself unawares, and if we take long to examine, calculate and consider the steps which should lead us to the choice of goodness then we will never arrive at our destination. In this way, Mamardashvili attempts to draw closer the moral sense (Mamardashvili calls this his *conscience*) to thought (Padgett 2007). Both of these are *inseparable, that is to say*, integral; it cannot be represented as a cause and effect relation. This model means that dwelling in thinking and in the ethical dimension means going beyond the natural and systematic inertness of the world, beyond what Mamardashvili calls the natural-causal connection of events.

Mamardashvili writes: “...at times people dream of creating a certain mechanism of happiness that can supposedly give rise to a special state of benevolence, which without me, including without my “fear” and” awe”, would produce a social harmony. Imagine this: you take a medicine for goodness and as a result something happens within you. Can you, because someone changed you, and not you changed yourself, extract some sense from this? It goes without saying that this is not the case. This nuance is important for an understanding of the argument, directed against the utopian ‘medicine of goodness’ (Mamardashvili 2000, p. 259).

Mamardashvili’s intuition, perhaps, will be that the very nature of thinking, which is associated with moral sense, should be devoid of inertness and finality.

Genuine thought, and not its surrogate, always occurs in conditions where there is no ready solution. This is connected with that freedom which by definition is included in the moral act. It is possible only in conditions when there is a real indeterminacy of choice. For example, when one can also freely choose evil just as easily as the good. From many philosophical contexts we know that only in the case of the reality of evil, good is not devalued and remains good. But the same requirement applies to thinking itself—it must be done without any compulsion.

“Hence, when we talk about conscious structures, we’re talking about structures that don’t exist naturally. In the sense that they are not inherent to us as natural beings; they emerge not logically nor psychologically (i.e. not from our intentions and mental material), but on the basis of the process, in the field of which should be investigated the phenomenon of consciousness or conscious, symbolic structures related to the emergence of effects that *post factum* we observe in the world. Consequently, if we eliminate the concept of conscious structures, we will not be able to explain (nor even simply distinguish) their existence or occurrence in the world—just as we will never be able to explain the fact of the human insubordination – a manifestation of human freedom” (Mamardashvili 1988, p. 56)

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to understand how the transcendental in Mamardashvili designates that mode of being human where all that is human does not belong to the world of natural facts and things. All that is essential in the human, that which makes someone human (values, consciousness, free will, meaning) are not encountered in the world of natural phenomena. In nature, there is no consciousness, there is a brain; in nature there is no freedom but physical determinism, and there are no (ethical) values. It is senseless to ask whether the fact that grass is green and that bodies fall downwards rather than up are morally good or bad.

A human being is superfluous in the world in which he must dwell. He does not proceed from its laws and it is this, possibly, that constitutes the greatest drama of his existence. Searching for one’s self in the world through the prism of science as well as through literary and artistic expression overlooks the (mental, meaningful, and value-based) essence of the human being. All attempts to reconstitute the image of the human being lack integrality—they turn out to be either deficient or false. Humanness remains the “framework condition” of the entire world, and is very firmly rooted in this world, but invariably passing beyond it. The world is always conjoined with the human, and the world is always a human world, but man himself is nowhere to be found in this world.

The human consciousness is precisely that location where this is especially evident. Consciousness shapes and appropriates the world, but it does not find itself in this world. It provides an opportunity to see physical objects but at the cost of a fundamental non-materiality of consciousness. It allows us to think about objects, but by means of a paradoxically non-objective consciousness. It generates knowledge organized in theories but cannot itself lie at the foundation of theoretical knowledge. Consciousness is that light which allows us to see everything while itself remaining invisible. Invisibility here also implies an objectlessness. It turns out that what is most significant is that which we ourselves are and that which is hidden within us. But insofar as the object is thought of as that which can be separated from us and is external of us, then it is clear that any attempt to build a theory of consciousness will systematically entangle us in paradoxes. A consciousness which objectifies things cannot at the same time both objectify and be objectified. One cannot observe



and be the object of observation. The transcendental nature of consciousness and the very principle of the transcendental is determined by this extraordinary and yet simple rule: the nature of observation consists in omitting the point from which the observation is conducted. An observation giving rise to a picture does not form a part of the picture in terms of that which is depicted in it. But the observation is present in the picture as that without which the picture would otherwise have been impossible. It is, as it were, present but not within it. "But if so, then suspending any concrete representation (and they should be suspended, because I think only when I am located in thought, that is, in the "topos" of thought), I cannot from some other third place, from a position external to this, look upon myself performing the act of thought. This is a non-material and a subjectless thought. And it is the condition for an existential act of human existence as a possible event in the world. It is, in turn, the basis for the transcendental perspective on the world or the transcendental consciousness, from whose position we understand what is said as the possibility of that world about which one speaks" (Mamardashvili 1988, p. 57)

I cited these phenomenological theses of Merab Mamardashvili not only to acquaint the reader with the originality of his philosophical thought but also to indicate what exactly constitutes the fundamental and, in my view, significant distinctiveness of his phenomenology of consciousness from other contemporary philosophical approaches. It was important to show their differences given their programmatic nature. In contemporary philosophy the divergences between continental (mainly transcendental) phenomenology and analytical philosophy have grown ever more significant. The latter considers it possible only to attest to the realism of consciousness, its irreducibility to physical processes and only to them. If we declare that consciousness exists, that it is necessary to "take it seriously" than we are taking a phenomenological position. If after that, we undertake a search for this consciousness and explore the universe of things and objects to do so, if we are ready to build an ontology of things so as to search together for this consciousness, then we still remain on phenomenological positions, if only we believe in the autonomy of consciousness. On the contrary, transcendental phenomenology, especially in its contemporary guise, which Mamardashvili has done much to develop and preserve, stresses the fundamental non-objectifying nature of consciousness. It is not sufficient to affirm the autonomy and reality of consciousness; one must understand just how inappropriate the rhetoric of things and entities is in regards to it. It is senseless to search for it as a thing amongst things, as the centre of atoms, waves, chords and so on. Even if we search for it as the fundamental law of the Universe alongside the fundamental laws of physics which cannot be deduced and explained but from which one simply needs to set out with, then we commit a radical error.

I overlook the most important thing in consciousness—its principal primordially in the world of objects and phenomena. Consciousness precedes any conversation, and not just any conversation about things. Consciousness always appears early and before, and in this sense, it is effectively fundamental (or substantial, in the terms of classical philosophy). But it is not fundamental in the terms of the fundamental laws of nature because it is not at all in the world. Consciousness cannot be found in the world insofar as the world appears on the heels of consciousness, resulting from consciousness. Consciousness always appears before the assertion of the world; it

is always a step ahead. And the natural work of thought is arranged so that we are not used to noticing it, as a transparent environment that does not announce itself in order to reflect the world around it. But it is precisely phenomenology which takes us back to that step, to this neglected condition, hinting that the transparent environment is invisible due to its transparency, but this does not mean that it does not exist. This idea of the return to the beginning and the revelation of the latent conditions of immersion into the world is regularly performed by Merab Mamardashvili's phenomenology.

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