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# The Philosophic Path of Merab Mamardashvili

*By*

Diana Gasparyan



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## Preface

Merab Konstantinovich Mamardashvili might appear a newcomer on the Western intellectual scene, yet this is not quite the case. A lot has been written about him, and in English, too. Bernard Murchland, Andrew Padgett, Mara Stafecka, Deyan Deyanov, Evert Van der Zweerde, Uldis Tironis, Julia Sushytska, Daniel Regnier, Alisa Slaughter, Millicent Vladiv-Glover, Elisa Pontini and others have written about him. In the bibliography to this book I cite a fairly large number of English-language works which, in one way or another, are devoted to the legacy of this Soviet-era philosopher. This fact by itself is rather unusual. It is unusual for Russian philosophers to ‘filter through’ to the West so apparently, despite the exceptions.

If we are to speak of the Western reception of Merab Mamardashvili, its distinctiveness resides in the fact that English-language authors do not simply write about him, but actively employ his work in their own scholarship. This is somewhat out of step with the common trends in citing Russian philosophers. The fact that Mamardashvili’s legacy is in great demand, and that the conceptual apparatus developed by him has been successfully applied, even outside of his native philosophical tradition, testifies that his philosophy has accomplished a lot, since it has succeeded in traversing cultural and national boundaries. Arguably, this success abroad is due not solely to Mamardashvili’s philosophy, but also to other related factors, such as interest in dissident thought or Mamardashvili’s own prominence vis-à-vis the Soviet political situation. Probably, no single factor can be discounted, but even if we take these into account, we cannot fail to note that Mamardashvili’s philosophical legacy was able to outlast its own era, persisting past moments of historic change and closure. This is attested by contemporary works on the philosophy of Mamardashvili, written by English-speaking authors. The year 2019, for example, marked the publication of the Alyssa DeBlasio’s study *The Filmmaker’s Philosopher*, which explores the influence of Mamardashvili’s philosophy on Russian cinema.<sup>1</sup> The same year, a cluster of essays on ‘The Philosophical Legacy of Merab Mamardashvili’ was published in a special issue of *Studies in East European Thought*, featuring research by Russian and Western scholars. It is encouraging to see the work of Mamardashvili become internationally known, even as the translations of his original philosophical works are currently out

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<sup>1</sup> Alyssa DeBlasio, *The Filmmaker’s Philosopher: Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

of print. In this book I frequently relied on Rodion Garshin's translation of Mamardashvili's *Symbol and Consciousness*. Many English-language works on Mamardashvili are being published in present-day Georgia, and a number of his original lecture cycles are being prepared for translation from Russian into Georgian. And now that this book is ready to see the light in English, I can say that the translation of Mamardashvili's ideas into another language cannot but affect the content of these ideas and, in its own small way, transform them. Understanding the contexts in which Mamardashvili thought and spoke can only help our appreciation, given that these were mainly Russian-speaking contexts.

Nevertheless, looking at this translation and recalling my conversations with colleagues in English, on how English-language texts about Russian-language authors are written and read, and how some of the philosophical approaches are applied in English-language philosophy, I understand that the difficulties of translation and linguistic problems need not be a significant issue for a motivated and engaged reader. This idea is reinforced by the words of Mamardashvili himself, who believed that it is not the expressive means which ultimately allow us to understand each other, but the wellspring that each of us consults before expressing any thought. Mamardashvili was convinced that this wellspring is uniform and universal for all who have ever thought something 'correct'. Mamardashvili wrote that if one of us manages to think something in the correct manner, we can be sure that many other thinkers before us thought the same, just as others will think the same after us. Mamardashvili believed in the unassailable nature of thought in the face of various challenges – time, culture, mores and, finally, language itself.

I hope that this book might contribute to acquainting a wider readership with the philosophy of Merab Mamardashvili, and that it might prompt the emergence of new work inspired by his legacy.

## Acknowledgments

This little book would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues, friends and family, and scholarly communities and institutions on two continents.

I owe my first thanks to Alyssa DeBlasio (Dickinson College), who encouraged me, back in 2014, to send her a draft of the present monograph. Soon afterwards, Alyssa published *The Filmmaker's Philosopher*, her own study of Mamardashvili's thought, which further stimulated me to complete my project. Without her active support, my book would have never seen the light of day. Marina Bykova (North Carolina State University) has given me valuable advice throughout my work on this book. More of an insider to Mamardashvili's era than I am, she was able to relate much knowledge that could not have been found in published form. I am indebted also to Mikhail Epstein (Emory University) for several invaluable conversations at the conferences of the ASEES (Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies) in Moscow and San Francisco. His remarks went a long way for me, being rich in productive ideas. Similarly, I am grateful to Susan McReynolds (Northwestern University) for our conversations in Moscow. I am deeply indebted to my Moscow friends and colleagues. Svetlana Klimova (Higher School of Economics) offered invaluable discussions of the ideas expressed in this book and commented on the manuscript, assisting its development. Victoriya Faybyshenko, a fine and deeply knowledgeable specialist in Mamardashvili's philosophy, did much to help me navigate this terrain.

I would like to express my special gratitude to the Mamardashvili Foundation (Moscow, Russia) and its founder, Alyona Mamardashvili, charged with the significant task of preserving her father's legacy. Alyona, who does so much to encourage scholarship, is ever-ready to share everything she knows with scholars, and my several conversations with her have been immensely helpful.

My English translator, Giuliano Vivaldi, has been a boon to this book, with his unique combination of Russian fluency and philosophical acumen. I am indebted, too, to Rodion Garshin, whose English translation of Mamardashvili's *Symbol and Consciousness* has supplied the basis for a number of edited quotations in this book. His assistance in working through every translator's choice in this book has been most illuminating to me, and a priceless experience. Elfir Sagetdinov, an expert in Mamardashvili's thought, assisted me in achieving a greater congruence between the translations in this book and their original sources. My Russian colleagues – Vladimir Porus, Andrey Maidansky and Sofia Danko – provided me with all possible moral support in my work.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my mother Anna, my husband Alexander, my daughter Sofia, my aunt Karina and all my near and dear ones. This book could have not been written without their untiring support and affection.

Finally, this publication was made materially possible by the generous financial assistance of the Russian Science Foundation, to which I extend my most cordial gratitude.



**PART 1**

*Origins and Sources*



## The Topology of Merab Mamardashvili's Path

Merab Konstantinovich Mamardashvili (1930–1990) belongs to that rare breed of Russian thinkers who came to be appreciated in their own time. This recognition transpired during Brezhnev's 'stagnation era', when fame came with contradictory connotations: official recognition carried with it a certain unpopularity, whereas unofficial renown would bring genuine honor and success. Mamardashvili, it seems, was able to inhabit both of these dimensions at once. Today, no one disputes the fact that the work of Mamardashvili has made a significant contribution in world philosophy, comparable with the achievements of well-known twentieth-century Western philosophers. He has been called 'the democratic aristocrat' and the 'Georgian-Russian Socrates'. There are many reasons for this appellation. First, the greater portion of Mamardashvili's massive bibliography is based on lectures, conversations and interviews – in short, oral communication. He believed, in keeping with the Socratic attitude, that friendly intellectual conversation had unquestionable advantages over text of any kind.

While Mamardashvili's works were rarely published in his lifetime, his lecture-based courses were often tape-recorded, transcribed, printed and edited by colleagues and students, ultimately forming the basis of his posthumous fame. Secondly, Mamardashvili was preoccupied with the secret of human motives and with ethical problems. He believed that ethical considerations were the most important element of any philosophy, and that the function of all other philosophic problems was to clarify philosophy's concealed ethical program. Third, to his friends and colleagues, Mamardashvili was very much a moral guide, a tutor and a mentor, frequently perceived as a model and a spiritual advisor. Finally, despite his voluminous output, Mamardashvili left behind no 'school of thought' or official disciples, although his influence on Russian-speaking philosophers was considerable. For the subsequent development of philosophy in Russia, his style, flow of thought and sense of direction became the gold standard.<sup>1</sup>

Mamardashvili was born on September 15, 1930, in the small Georgian town of Gori, already somewhat famous as the birthplace of Iosif Djugashvili, later

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1 M. F. Bykova, 'Merab Mamardashvili and His Philosophical Calling', *Studies in East European Thought*, v. 71, 3 (October 2019), 169–72.

known to the world as Joseph Stalin. In 1949, Mamardashvili enrolled in the Department of Philosophy at the Moscow State University. The institution's philosophical life at the time of his enrollment can only be characterized as stagnant. History of philosophy had always been the most developed branch of academic philosophy in Russia and the Soviet Union; modern investigations of particular topics were rare. But Mamardashvili saw no obstacle in this settled academic tendency.

At the beginning of his creative path, he built his career in an entirely conventional way. He received an education and spent nearly all of his philosophical life in the Russian capital, working at different Moscow universities, including the Moscow State University and a number of scientific research institutes linked to the Soviet Academy of Sciences. He was also involved with the country's main philosophical journal, *Voprosy filosofii* (*Questions of Philosophy*). However, the success of his philosophic thinking exceeded significantly the traditional rewards of an academic career. He retained an air of marginality in all his activities, from the carelessness with which he carried out the duties of a scholar at a Soviet university, to shirking the responsibility of producing volumes of written work, assured as those might have been of prompt publication. He wrote but two monographs: *The Forms and Content of Thought: Towards a Critique of the Hegelian Doctrine of Forms of Knowledge* (1968) and *The Arrow of Inquiry: A Sketch of Natural-Historic Gnoseology* (published posthumously in 1997).

The rest of Mamardashvili's legacy – principally, recordings and transcripts of his lectures and conversations – can be characterized as thoroughly Socratic. The greater part of the recordings were made by Mamardashvili himself, with a cassette recorder (it all started with a Grundig voice recorder, a rarity in that time and place). Beginning in 1967, he brought the device to nearly all his lectures and talks. These recordings have been fairly well preserved and were subsequently transcribed. His lectures were also recorded by many in the audience, but those recordings are rather piecemeal, and their quality often leaves much to be desired. This, nevertheless, has not prevented students and scholars alike from painstakingly collecting these materials. Lecture audio recordings have allowed us to capture the live unfolding of his philosophical thought, together with the magic of his voice and the resonant silence of classroom spaces.

The thoroughness with which Mamardashvili recorded his own lectures has sometimes provoked mixed reactions. Some of his detractors interpret this habit of his as a consequence of 'success going to his head' or of a deep narcissism. However, applying psychological interpretations is somewhat amiss here; the reasons behind the practice are purely philosophical and shed light on the principles of all his professional work. Whereas the majority of speakers

initially draft a text of their future speech and then duplicate it in performance, Mamardashvili was convinced that a written text could communicate very little. The special nature of philosophy resides in the fact that its propositions are not categorizable as information – as descriptions of the phenomena we encounter in the world. When we hear the phrases 'Being alone is, and Nothing is not' or 'I think, therefore I am', there is no guarantee that a spark of understanding should arise immediately in the mind of the listener. Reciting philosophical thoughts is pointless. One should indicate to the listener the path along which it is necessary to travel in order to arrive at the 'recorded' thought, and wait, if possible, for the listener to follow this path at their own pace.

It was this task that Mamardashvili addressed by recording his lectures, as he went to his lectures to think – not merely to report the results of prior thinking to his audience. His lectures, then, were recorded 'in reverse' relative to the usual process: first, he thought aloud, in performance; a written record was derivative of this event, not prior to it. He never knew where the movement of his thoughts would lead him, and was never assured of their success. Yet the idea that the thought process is something that does not belong to you but is instead performed through you (in the best of cases, with your cooperation), encouraged Mamardashvili to try to capture the very spontaneous act, the self-reproduction of meaning and the initiative of the spirit that presented themselves to him, although not entirely as a product of his will. Throughout his life, Mamardashvili was convinced of the spontaneity of thought – something that could only be discovered within oneself but could not be arbitrarily willed or provoked. The thinker, to him, was a humble medium, not an acting subject. The cassette recorder, remotely capturing the life of thought, is a symbol of the passivity of the thinker and the activity of thought itself.

Initially after graduation, he worked at the editorial offices of *Questions of Philosophy*; his first article would be published in that journal. He then worked at several research institutions in Moscow and other Soviet cities, lecturing, for instance, at Moscow State University's Department of Psychology and at the Institute of Cinematography, where he taught advanced courses to screenwriters and film directors. These lectures or, as he called them, 'conversations', would lay the foundation of his creative legacy. In 1970, Mamardashvili presented his doctoral thesis in Tbilisi; two years later he was made a professor. For the final decade of his life, Mamardashvili lived in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, and worked at the Institute of Philosophy. He would lecture regularly on Descartes, Kant, and Proust; his book-length *Introduction to Philosophy*, preparatory lecture notes and multifarious shorter philosophical papers were all 'archived', to be published but posthumously.

Shortly after the beginning of his creative path, Mamardashvili's recognizable authorial style can be discerned, in retrospect. One can detect a decisive break with the traditional Soviet vocabulary of philosophical concepts and the rhetoric of a 'typical' university professor. His manner acquired inexplicable European features, steeped in contexts far from evident. The originality of his language engendered a particular effect of near-veneration. The unusual style of his philosophic thought cast a spell over the auditorium, yet it was difficult to transmit beyond the walls within which Mamardashvili was lecturing. Given that the language in which Mamardashvili spoke was otherwise nowhere to be found and provoked an enthusiastic reaction in his listeners, his expressive constructions would later come to be fetishized, turning into linguistic artefacts. The audience tried to learn them by heart, assuming that the manner of his speech had something to do with its content. This led to the amusing consequence that many became busy with collecting 'Mamardashvilian' sentences and catchphrases. After the philosopher's death, some of these terms became 'passwords' that guaranteed entrance into recondite intellectual circles. For instance, every 'initiated' philosopher from Moscow State University in the 1990s was liable to use the word *razvyorka* (originally a drafting term for an isometric sketch) in the sense of 'concept, idea or thought', the word *instantsiya*, meaning 'essence, or a certain something' and 'ever-already' in the sense of the transcendental principle of the conditions of possibility. Terms he used supplied the syntax of a philosophic rhetoric shared by many philosophers (predominantly in Moscow) and were recognizably Mamardashvilian. Just as well-known was the distinction between 'classical' and 'non-classical' philosophy, once again belonging to Mamardashvili. It was not necessary to have been present at his lectures to be a transmitter of this style. You could hear undertones of philosophic reasoning in the style of Mamardashvili among the younger generation, despite the fact that many of them had not even read his books. By the end of the 1990s, the atmosphere of the First Humanities Building of Moscow State University was so strongly imbued with Mamardashvilian charisma that a single visit within its walls would guarantee a connection to his special way of speaking and thinking.

This style of intensive engagement could play some tricks on his philosophic adherents, conscious or otherwise. This was manifest in the persistence of invoking his sophisticated constructions, regardless of their applicability. Yet, despite the grumbling of the envious, who reproached Mamardashvili for the artificial mannerisms of his language, his stylistic choices were never an end in themselves. The secret of the distinctiveness of this language was that it did not address philosophic ideas, nor even cognitive experience as such. Mamardashvili sought to realize cognitive experience, and effect it anew in

communicating with his audience. He was convinced that there was no other way to convey an idea to an interlocutor other than to live its understanding anew in his or her presence. Therefore, the choice of certain linguistic means simply permitted one to cling to a thought before an audience, in a way that enabled its understanding by virtue of someone being present who could already understand the thought in the here and now, as just then spoken aloud. Mamardashvili's speech was extemporaneous. The subsequent sacralization of his expressive means is reminiscent of the fairy tale about the transformation of gold coins into shards of clay, since they did not produce the desired effect when taken out of the auditorium or when read from the pages of a book. It arose only in a situation where the audience experienced thinking about that of which Mamardashvili was speaking. In this case, the words, like keys, would instantly open up the right door, realizing the Platonic narrative of recollection, according to which we can only know that which is already known.

Since Mamardashvili valued his independence and had no special devotion to the Soviet regime, his career in Soviet Russia did not evolve along regular lines. The authorities usually took indirect action against the ideologically untrustworthy, depriving the offender of opportunities to lecture, publish or engage in scholarship. In this regard, Mamardashvili's was a textbook case of such persecution. Not infrequently, lecture courses already announced were canceled, opportunities for foreign travel were denied, all to the effect that his entire career was graced with but several years of undisturbed scholarly work.

Mamardashvili's avoidance of the standard Soviet philosophical rhetoric was not only a tribute to living thought. A journey abroad occasioned the growth of a connection to other kinds of philosophical language during the so-called 'Khrushchev Thaw' (1956–1964), a period which proved remarkably fruitful for Mamardashvili. Even prior to the 1961 defense of his dissertation (his 'candidacy', under the Soviet academic nomenclature), Mamardashvili was given a post at the new international journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, founded in Prague. The young thinker could explore a wide range of unique possibilities during his time of working at the periodical, known in the West as *World Marxist Review*. In addition to his native Russian and Georgian, Mamardashvili had an excellent command of several European languages (English, German, French and Italian), and greatly benefited from his travels and research abroad – especially, it seems, in Prague, where he finally familiarized himself with works almost unknown in the Soviet Union, including those of Husserl, Nietzsche, and Freud. It was also in Prague that he rediscovered Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (his second reading of Proust, the first being in French). It was his work in Prague that offered him access to Western literature, both scholarly and artistic, practically non-existent in Moscow, while

permitting him, too, to travel throughout Western Europe. On those journeys, he met with and conversed with Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser and other European intellectuals, participating in the lively philosophical discussions of the time. In 1967, during a conference in Italy, Mamardashvili made an unauthorized trip to Paris, which resulted in his being forbidden all foreign travel – a ban that would last for nearly two decades.

Strange as it might seem, the period that followed – Mamardashvili's era of self-proclaimed 'internal exile' – would become his most productive. He defended his candidate's thesis in 1961 and returned to *Questions of Philosophy* as its deputy editor-in-chief. He then presented his doctoral dissertation, followed by securing a full professorship of philosophy at the Moscow State University. In this period, he delivered his most impressive course of lectures and became a living legend for many of his followers. Even at a world-class Soviet university like the MSU, even in the warming ideological climate of the 1960s, giving a course of lectures on figures like Nietzsche and Freud was bound to cause a scandal. Lectures that merely alluded to these figures, however, were not prohibited – and those were the lectures attended by unprecedented audiences. Considerations of comfort were abandoned (for the administration did not even attempt to provide enough seats), with attendees clogging the doorways, sitting on windowsills, and swarming in the corridors. Yet this success was brief. By the 1970s, Mamardashvili's relations with the university officials became strained, permissions to lecture were becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, and foreign travel prospects were anything if not bleak. Due to the 'rogue' character of his activities, the official attitude towards Mamardashvili was now one of rising suspicion. One could too easily discern his many Western affinities, all deemed unacceptable, hostile and grossly erroneous by Soviet authorities. Mamardashvili found it increasingly difficult to continue his work in a hostile environment that was a daily reality.

As for the lectures themselves, they were recorded and transcribed. Unfortunately, not all of the tape-recordings have survived. In the late 1970s, when Mamardashvili's students started recording his lectures on a regular basis, cassette tapes were a scarce commodity, with the result that almost every lecture had to be recorded over immediately after transcribing. Only one work, his *Treatise on Developing Consciousness* (later published under the title *The Arrow of Inquiry*) was actually written – not spoken – by Mamardashvili. He worked on the book in mid-1970s. Later, Mamardashvili often visited Moscow but never carried on any professional activities in Russia. Late in the 1980s, he had another opportunity to go abroad and lecture. He traveled extensively around Europe, while teaching and actively engaging in scholarship. As for North America, he only visited it twice – in 1988, as a speaker at the Dortmund

Conference, and in 1989, when invited by the Kettering Foundation to lead a series of seminars on Civil Society at Ohio University. He died on November 25, 1990 from cardiac rupture at the Moscow airport, on his way back from Europe.

'Thinking aloud' was Mamardashvili's principal philosophical specialization. Those who listened to his lectures in their live form are unanimous in referring to Mamardashvili as a perfect improviser. He always tried to involve his audience in the philosophical conversation, which was indeed his favorite genre. Notwithstanding his apparently 'free-and-easy' nature, Mamardashvili spent a lot of time preparing for lectures. His friends, meantime, deemed him a 'sybarite'; he took almost no part in social activities, rarely published his works, and, in this way, cared little for his professional career. To a large extent, it was accounted for by the fact that the branches of philosophy that he dealt with (metaphysics and ontology) were mostly disapproved of by the authorities, for ideological reasons. There was no point in writing such books, since one knew that they would never be published and could hardly expect to find their reader. While it made little sense to write books, Mamardashvili endeavored to concentrate on verbal presentation in the form of lectures, seminars and interviews. His preparation was thorough and meticulous; he carefully studied texts, wrote out extracts, made notes, translated a great deal (frequently improving existing translations, for the purposes of the lecture at hand), formulated key ideas, and selected the most vivid examples (often from literary fiction) for illustration.

Mamardashvili was a true cosmopolitan and a polyglot. Many of his friends and colleagues maintained that he could have made a career for himself as a philosopher in any European country. Yet, hardly ever did he seriously contemplate the possibility of emigration. Although he made several short-term visits abroad, he spent most of his life in Russia. Likewise, in spite of his fluent command of European languages, Mamardashvili chose to express his own philosophic ideas in Russian. His reward is his own inestimable contribution to the Russian culture.

Outwardly, Mamardashvili's life was quite free of extravagance and eccentricity. People who were close to him noted his astonishing tranquility and peace of mind – but also some subdued passion, a mood that appears to have governed his lectures. Mamardashvili was exceptionally considerate of other people, and genuinely interested in others. Those who knew him personally characterize him as a person who lived up to his beliefs and principles. All of this earned him his Socratic fame, sometimes double-edged, as he had his detractors. He was respected by those who advocated intellectual independence, and envied by others. In the words of the contemporary philosopher Evert Van der Zweerde, Mamardashvili was 'a constant hindrance to the



established order'. To this, we can add that his opposition to the 'established order' was not so much socio-political as philosophic in nature. The philosopher is destined to work against the grain of the establishment, to be (in Mamardashvili's own words) 'a frontier creature; that is, a representative of what cannot be expressed'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Merab Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought* [*Беседы о мышлении*] (Moscow: Merab Mamardashvili Foundation, 2015), 28.

## Philosophical Principles and Commandments

What are the key milestones of Mamardashvili's philosophy, its main orientation points and guiding principles? Did he have his own theory or a set of ideas and arguments? Even though the word 'system' is not quite part of his vocabulary, he definitely had a system of views. He stated: 'Thinking is my life path ... Thinking about existence is a way of being a thinker.'<sup>1</sup> Thinking does not signify simply an ability to formulate a thesis. You need to show yourself and the other, if there is another, *how* a thought is thought, *how* it is understood. An interlocutor is someone in whose presence we understand something anew. His philosophical thought is a report on the flow of the very process of thought, in contrast with a system, which is an account of what has already taken place. Nevertheless, it is possible to isolate the cardinal features of Mamardashvili's philosophical position or sensibility. As far as Mamardashvili's principal philosophic ideas are concerned, the following generalizations can be made to characterize his thought.

*Theme One.* Mamardashvili believed that it did not suffice to consider philosophy (real philosophy) a purely abstract theoretical discipline. The origins of philosophic thought are trivial: it is deeply rooted in the natural human life, its feelings and emotions. If a philosopher needs to prove the existence of God or of the external world, it is not because he has nothing better to do, but because in worlds where God exists or does not exist, worlds that are purely imaginary or imaginative or, on the contrary, entirely independent of perception, a person will live entirely different lives and experience non-identical feelings. Therefore, the stakes of philosophic questions are high: our actual life is a function of our answers to such questions.

*Theme Two.* Although philosophy is close to our immediate everyday needs, it is, at the same time, paradoxical and difficult. Mamardashvili stressed that a true thought requires significant effort – since philosophy attempts to understand something that is basically inconceivable. Philosophy (to paraphrase Wittgenstein) tries to speak of something whereof one should be silent. Although Mamardashvili shared Wittgenstein's famous thought of philosophy being too ambitious, he was more optimistic than his Cambridge predecessor.

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<sup>1</sup> Merab Mamardashvili, 'To Be a Philosopher Is a Destiny' ['Быть философом – это судьба'], *Filosofskaya i sotsiologicheskaya mysl'* (Kyiv, Ukraine), 2, 1989, 30.

A characteristic statement of Mamardashvili's proposes: 'A human cannot jump out of the world, but he can put himself onto the rim of the world.'<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, philosophic reflection does help us 'jump out' of the limits of language or trivial thinking patterns and see the world (with the genuine state of affairs) from the outside. Philosophic thought can achieve such breakthroughs by means of human consciousness, which is by nature an over-structure that allows our going beyond the limits of actual experience. In this manner, Copernicus was every day exposed to the same vistas and experiences as those of his fellow citizens and fellow scientists. He had no spacecraft to rise above the Earth and see the exact arrangement of celestial bodies and their relations to one another. Strictly speaking, none of the empirical material collected by Copernicus indicated directly that the Earth should move around the Sun. Yet, in spite of the meagerness of his data, something allowed Copernicus to 'see' the world from the outside, to rise above the world of experience and to perceive something original.

One of Mamardashvili's favorite illustrations of this idea is the example of Poincaré's 'creatures'. Let us imagine a plane inhabited by one-dimensional creatures. They move about the plane and behave in such a manner that the magnitude by which they gauge their movement to some point  $X$ , decreases with their movement. And, since the magnitude becomes less and the creatures themselves become less, they will never reach the  $X$  point. Living in such a reality, the creatures may reasonably conclude that they live on an infinite plane. However, if someone could look at the entire picture from the outside – laterally – he or she would see that such a plane is not infinite but in fact finite. The outside observer would be able to see the point that a creature seeks to reach, the creature itself, and the fact that the magnitudes change with the creatures' movements. It would be obvious for the onlooker that the creature is one-dimensional and lives on a finite plane, though it seems infinite to the creature itself. But none of the experiences possible for the creature itself (i.e. the experiences of moving and gauging) could yield any knowledge of the creature's true location.

It is this 'looking from the outside' that philosophy claims to practice; yet, the problem with such a claim is that philosophers, too, live on the same 'one-dimensional plane' as everyone else, seeing the same things that others see. Still, they hope that one day they will be able to lift up their heads and see the world from the outside. Mamardashvili believed that, though it

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2 Merab Mamardashvili, *Introduction to Philosophy* [Введение в философию] (Moscow: Merab Mamardashvili Foundation, 2019), 26.

is not impossible, fulfilling such an ambition was arduous and always a miracle of sorts. The kind of thinking that proposes to see the world from the outside – that is, to see reality – can only accomplish its mission by drawing on the extremes of human intellectual resources. That is what philosophy is – the *ultimate* intellectual effort, whose successes are recorded in the history of its theories and doctrines.

*Theme Three.* One common question in philosophy concerns its meaning and purpose. Mamardashvili had his own answer to this question. In many ways, it coalesced with that of the classical philosophical tradition going back to Socrates: that philosophy is a technique that allows a person to understand his or her own self and, ultimately, to know how to live virtuously. Contrary to the common opinion of philosophy as a collection of refined and extremely complex ideas, Mamardashvili thought philosophy a vital necessity, without which human life would remain incomprehensible and baffling. At the same time, Mamardashvili said that the greatest human desire is to feel alive – and for a human being, this means not so much experiencing the biological processes of life but striving towards understanding. Without it, events, feelings and thoughts amount to nothing more than absurd pictures, an unintelligible canvas of life. If not contemplated, they appear as a kind of alien, raw material of a drama in which humans play but arbitrary roles. In such a case, I can only say ‘this is my life’ if I have understood its meaning, that is, the mysterious symbol realized in and by it. This realization can only be attained by means of the conscious effort of thought. Any sequence of events that makes up the history of a particular person’s life may remain external and alien to him or her. In a certain sense, whatever event happens to me, there is nothing in it that makes it ‘mine’ or ‘about me’.

Even the intensity of an experience makes little difference in this regard. For example, if I were taken hostage or won a million dollars, I could experience that which was happening to me in a sincere and vivid manner but still miss the main thing – namely, why this happened to me, and was this not an event of pure chance, a consequence of ‘God’s game of dice’? Mamardashvili said that the *individuation of life is guaranteed only by a cognitive act*. Otherwise, I am always living ‘an alien life.’<sup>3</sup> But the cognitive act, in turn, is realized through a statement of *necessity*, of the non-random nature of what is happening, the fundamental impossibility of things being otherwise. To understand is to make sense of what I have experienced and to realize that my life should be

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3 Merab Mamardashvili, *Philosophy Is Thinking Aloud. Consciousness and Civilization* [Философия – это мышление вслух. Сознание и цивилизация] (Moscow: Mamardashvili Foundation, 2011).

as it is, and not otherwise. If this does not happen, we are doomed to exist as zombies, anthropomorphic creatures devoid of human nature. The existence of such beings, as Mamardashvili says, is simulated, depending on forces alien and incomprehensible to them. To extricate oneself from this state requires the performance of philosophic work, namely, the technical skill of thinking correctly, generalizing particulars under universals, designing kaleidoscopic images in meaningful and integral gestalts. On this path, we need *symbols* (not signs), which maintain the necessity of being realized.

*Theme Four.* A human being is a special creature, not merely a product of evolution. Some human abilities, such as the ability to share certain values or to think and to experience conscious life, do not arise directly out of human nature. Mamardashvili says that if we are intellectually honest enough, we must admit that the origins of the phenomenon of human *conscience* and human ethics are much too enigmatic. There are no natural reasons in the world to account for the endowment of human beings with consciousness or ethical feelings. Strictly speaking, we have no intelligible answers to questions like ‘Why do the humans have the ability to differentiate good and evil?’ or ‘Why are we not zombies but creatures possessed of internal mental life?’ We might say, of course, that consciousness makes humans more reasonable and, therefore, more enduring and viable, whereas the ability to make a choice between values makes us, at least, more scrupulous. All those explanations do make sense; however, if examined more closely, they turn out to imply that we have already taken up some conscious position or mean a specific set of values (for instance, the value of life).

To explain what we need consciousness or moral sense for, a person must have already applied his or her consciousness and ethical feeling. We know, however, that correct definitions are not made that way. We would have to conclude, then, that in terms of the natural reality that surrounds us, ethics and consciousness are essentially *surplus* abilities – surplus in relation to the natural world, yet indispensable for the human world. This idea allows Mamardashvili to say that humans cannot be ‘derived’ from nature, and that between nature as given to us, and the humans, as given to ourselves, there is an unbridgeable chasm, a kind of blank space or a gap.

*Theme Five.* The next theme in Mamardashvili’s thought dovetails with the one just described. It is related to what can be called the ‘vertical nature’ of the human. For Mamardashvili, thinking is originally rooted in some supernatural origin and has a ‘cosmic’ quality. If thinking and consciousness cannot be deduced as a natural (for example, evolutionary) process within the physical manifestation of the world (since there must be a consciousness in the beginning to which ‘nature’ is provided as a concept and meaning), then

consciousness cannot be deduced naturally from the present order of things. This means that thinking is something supernatural, something inexplicable and superfluous to the world. If there are no natural reasons for us to think, then this thinking is performed despite the logic of the manifested world. Therefore, the human in its mysterious origin belongs to the logic of the metaphysical. It is not just a cultural or symbolic phenomenon, but a 'metaphysical' one.

The proof of this thesis is the simple and obvious fact that despite its fragile physicality and effective existence as a clot of matter, a person can know the ideal and understand absolute meanings. Being born and dying as a body, a person understands the laws of mathematics and logic, and formulates philosophic ideas. Moreover, the human not only understands them, but also discloses them for the first time. Plato, Kant, and Einstein were just people – and yet, they discovered things that are not deducible from the natural order of things. Every discovery is made against the simple logic of observation, for there is nothing in observation to indicate the hidden entities and eternal truths behind them.<sup>4</sup> There is something naïve in the belief that by diligent study of empirical science one can discover the laws of nature. These laws hold true everywhere, but they are not encountered anywhere as a phenomenon among other phenomena.

Nevertheless, a person can arrive at these truths, but this access is not to be gained along the analytical path. In comparison to our knowledge of phenomena and objects, this knowledge is not gained by lateral transition from one cause to another. It is a result of that connection which, like a constructed perpendicular, pulls together experience itself with what is given in experience. We cannot discover these conditions in the world, but in reality, we always already know them. And we approach the world from this point of view. With this thesis in mind, Mamardashvili says that 'a human is a being of the Faraway'.<sup>5</sup> His world is a world of relation to the phenomenal world from the perspective of eternity, to which the human being is always already profoundly connected. The human understands higher ideas, although he or she can never express them. Meanwhile, the world that is given to us as evident is bonded and cemented by these meanings. We look at the world from the point of view of the absolute – the good, the true and the beautiful. The human being relates to the world from a perspective of what is not in the world, and this radical

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4 Svetlana Klimova, 'Thinking Eternally and Continuously: The Russian Experience of Mamardashvili', *Studies in East European Thought*, v. 71, 3, 199–215.

5 Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 36.

absence in the world of that which forms the basis of human judgments makes the human resident in another world.

Thus, according to Mamardashvili, a human is always a stranger, an otherworldly being. We cannot concretize this transcendent world, but instead we find ourselves in it (actualized in thought-acts, and potentiated at all other times), and from our foothold in it we relate to the world that we know objectively. Mamardashvili calls these meanings, not present in experience but constitutive of our experience, *symbols*. These symbols convey us to a world that arches over history and time. The discovery of a natural law is, for Mamardashvili, a communion of symbols, and so is a moral judgment or a moral act. Similarly, it is the connection with the sublime that will explain the human ability to experience beauty and to see it as an end in itself.

*Theme Six.* The next theme also stems from the distinction between consciousness and the natural order. We attribute the ethical dimension of consciousness to this distinction. Behavior that does not arise from circumstances and expectations, and that is often enacted in spite of those, is usually conceived by us as ethical. This important theme helps us to fully understand his theory of consciousness in its transcendental interpretation. When Mamardashvili says that ‘there is no natural causal (that is, inartificial) chain of occurrences that would give rise to a human, which includes engendering thought in the human’,<sup>6</sup> or that ‘thought is effort’, this seems to mean that consciousness is part of the domain of the normative, not of the positive. This echoes with the Christian motif of *understanding*, interpreted in the Christian tradition as understanding the difference between *good and evil*. If we do not understand this difference, then we do not understand at all. This is the fundamental condition of the possibility of understanding and of consciousness.

In this way, consciousness is of an axiological nature. It is this aspect that makes it capable of capturing what is not *in* or *of* this world – such as values, introduced by the human mind and through which the human mind understands the world. Meaning, too, is captured from within this dimension of value, not that of actuality. Suppose that a certain person says: ‘This city will never again be the same for me’. Her friend may then ask: ‘What has happened?’ The first speaker’s phrase informs us about the difference in her perception of one and the same object, the city. An artificial-intelligence program will evaluate the meaning of this phrase in this way, but a person is usually able to see those meanings that are not literally announced. As a rule, we call our ability to interpret incomplete statements *understanding*. If we look closely at the nature of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

grasping these meanings, they will be axiological, ethical in nature. But it is the ethical that slips from the world of natural objects and things.

Therefore, being an ethical being, as well as a conscious one, according to Mamardashvili, means acting *contrary to nature*, systematically falling out with the actuality as determined by circumstances. It is the conversation from the point of view of *what is not*, and not of *what is*, that we call understanding. Yet this is the quality that we believe to be the basis of the ethical. There are no ideals in the natural world, but pursuing them as if they were real is the essence of ethical intuition. The contraposition of such concepts as the 'natural order of things' ('natural causality') and 'consciousness' ('the human in a narrow sense', 'the historical', 'the cultural') for Mamardashvili is needed to show that a person is constituted by a special connection to an order of ideas and values that exceeds her or his situation in the world. In the simplest sense, we are talking about the 'dimension' of ideals: goodness, justice, truth, meaning, about which a person has a stable intuition, but which are never shown in the world in all its 'graphic' integrity. However, a person not only has an idea of what is not 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.), she is also guided by these ideals, 'marshals' herself according to these principles, acting as if they were quite real, even in the empirical world. Mamardashvili here proposes a formula: *a human being is a being for whom the ideal is real.*<sup>7</sup>

Following this line, the philosopher asserts that to be human is to be involved in an order of ideas and values that obtain beyond one's current condition. But this requires exertion (Mamardashvili often speaks of 'the muscles of thought'), and the experience does not happen on its own. But if, in view of this effort, we take credit for all the resulting activity, we are also mistaken. The transcendental nature of consciousness indicates a certain lagging character of our consciousness. My consciousness is always ahead of me as a conscious being. Consciousness, or rather the experience of thinking, is a state of meaningful extemporaneousness. There is no algorithm or sequential, step-by-step path that would necessarily lead us to the point of understanding. The experience of consciousness is the experience of the so-called 'already-consciousness'. In this connection, Mamardashvili uses the term 'indivisibility', metaphorically suggesting that in a situation of self-understanding, one can only find oneself *already* understanding something. When we think, we always already find ourselves thinking, with no intermediary step to be found between non-thought and thought. It is impossible to provoke understanding in yourself, you can

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<sup>7</sup> Mamardashvili, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 356.



only await it. When performing an intellectual act, I am, in a way, but passively registering the manifestation of cognition performed with my participation. This entails an important consequence. It turns out that no methodical or logical sequence of steps taken on the path to understanding can be guaranteed to lead us there. We can significantly increase the odds by being diligent in thinking, but this does not amount to a guarantee. If we understand something, it means that we *already* understood it. In Mamardashvili's logic, the entryway of thought already belongs to thought itself.

How can we apply the idea of 'indivisibility' of thought to the rationality of a moral act? From Mamardashvili's point of view, just as in the case of thought, the determination to do or not to do something is not introduced from the outside. There is no algorithm by means of which we could arrive at a moral decision. In a situation where we have already chosen the good, we can only 'catch ourselves unawares', and should we instead deliberate, rationalize and think through the steps that should lead us to the choice of the good, we would never get to our destination. Thus, Mamardashvili seeks to draw a rapprochement between the moral sense (to which he refers as *conscience*) and thought. Both are indivisible, that is, integral, and cannot be represented in the form of a cause-and-effect trajectory. Such a model entails that dwelling in the dimensions of thought and ethical judgment means stepping outside of the natural and deterministic momentum of the world, beyond the limits of what Mamardashvili calls the natural-causal continuum of events.

Mamardashvili's intuition appears to be that the very nature of thinking, which is related to moral sense, should be devoid of inertia and conclusiveness. Genuine thinking, and not its surrogates, always takes place in an absence of ready-made solutions. This is attributable to the freedom that, by definition, is inherent in moral action. Thought and moral action alike are only possible under the conditions of genuine indeterminacy as to the available choices, such as the situation in which one can freely choose evil just as well as the good. Multiple philosophical contexts would suggest that only in the case of the reality of evil can the good maintain its value and remain good. But the same criterion applies to thinking – it must be performed without compulsion.

*Theme Seven.* Mamardashvili always tended to adhere to Platonism. It seems that he believed that regardless of whether we conceive any laws or ideas or not, they exist independently of the consciousness that conceives them. The theorem of Pythagoras, the law of the perdurability of matter or the principles of data encoding exist regardless of whether human consciousness knows anything about them or not. When we ask one of the first philosophic questions – *How do natural laws exist and do they depend on the human mind?* – common sense prompts us to suppose that, even if there were no thinking creature left

in the world who would know that  $2+2=4$ , that the Earth moves around the Sun, and that the angular sum of a triangle is  $180$  degrees, all these truths would still continue to exist and remain true. Though nothing was known in Plato's time about the synthesis of DNA molecules, that synthesis went on just the same as it goes nowadays, when we do know something about it. This means that truths exist regardless of our knowledge, and our knowledge thereof is not a condition of their existence.

For Mamardashvili, this Platonic pre-supposition was essential, since he believed that by thinking properly we, almost by chance, encounter truths, even in our world. This process is nevertheless not subject to conscious control. Our thought can invent hundreds of multifarious ideas and theories; yet, only some of them will be consistent with reality. This circumstance makes us admit that active thinking as such does not guarantee an encounter with truth; in spite of the efficient work of consciousness it may so happen that we will never encounter it. However paradoxically this may sound, active and creative work of our mind is responsible, rather, for fictitious images – that is, images that are entirely inconsistent with the real state of affairs in the world. Absolute active thinking is imagination, that is, the ability to create a series of mythical images. If thinking is possessed of nothing but activity, then, probably, we are dealing with some fictitious knowledge – an 'imitation truth'. On the other hand, the kind of thinking that does have a chance of encountering the truth (though such an encounter, Mamardashvili stresses, is never guaranteed) can occur under conditions when, apart from the performance of 'the work of thought', there is something else – something that is utterly unintentional and in no way derived from what has already been thought. Something else should appear in thought – something, for which the thought itself is not responsible – and this 'something' can give us a chance at true understanding.

*Theme Eight.* With regard to ancient philosophers, Mamardashvili favored not only Plato, but also Parmenides; in particular, he shared the latter's views concerning the identity of thinking and being. Given its laconism, this proposition is not so simple to understand, and tends to puzzle philosophers. It should be noted that Mamardashvili was always susceptible to instances of philosophical terms 'living a life of their own' and failing to express any intelligible meaning. Terms like 'thinking' and 'being' are some of the trickiest in this regard. It is not easy to understand the meaning of the distinction between 'thinking' and 'being' – yet philosophers often make recourse to this distinction, and to questions of primacy of one or the other. According to Mamardashvili, consciousness coincides with being, for there are two entirely equivalent answers to the question of antecedence of the modes of being or consciousness. On the one hand, one should, first of all, *be* (i.e. *exist*) in order to be *conscious*; yet, it is

also true that one should be *conscious* in order to *be* (since there needs be an entity conscious of the fact of being, in order to attest the mode of being itself). However hard we might try to find the point of origin, it will always resist our attempts; there will always be *consciousness* lurking within *being*, and *being* lurking within *consciousness*. The rational thing to do is to admit the identity of being and consciousness. *To be* means *to be conscious* and *to be conscious* means *to be*.

There is another logical difficulty with the distinction of consciousness and being, since, at length, the question 'What is real?' only has meaning within the continuum of being and consciousness. Events occur not only in the physical space and time, but also in the dimension of *meaning*, which runs parallel to space and time. Because of meaning, it is practically impossible to isolate being from consciousness, since, typically, existence is attributed to objects that are independent of consciousness, while consciousness is understood as something that allows a certain understanding of objects in existence. This gives rise to the question of antecedence, be it of being or of consciousness.

Philosophy, however, has long doubted such an approach to describing the world. Systems like those of transcendental philosophy and phenomenology treat things as 'things understood' or 'things consciously perceived'. In this context, being and consciousness (or, objects and thoughts about them) neither precede each other nor exist due to one another or determine one another; they do not represent two different realities, but are essentially aspects of a single reality. When I look at a book, I deem its existence entirely independent of my understanding, of my grasping the meaning of what I see. Yet, apparently, this is not correct. The book is an image-object which is recognized as such by me – and solely by me. There are a hundred other ways to 'see' a book – for example, as a sheaf of paper, as a combination of atoms or as a bundle of force-fields. In other words, one can fail to see a book for what it is. We can draw the boundary of the object differently, and then, instead of a book, we will see something else. Let us recall the famous figure-ground 'illusions' that allow us to see one thing (such as an urn) or another (a pair of human profiles). Seeing either image is only made possible by a conscious selection among perceptions by the viewer. It makes no sense, though, to ask whether one of the images is 'more real' than the other; likewise, it makes little sense to establish the primacy of either the urn or the profiles.

*Theme Nine.* Mamardashvili was alien to naturalisms of all stripes. By contrast, he was close to transcendental philosophy, to which he gave an expansive resonance and his own interpretation. That being said, he was ever-reluctant to define philosophic ideas as various 'isms'. He preferred to think without specifying his approach or method. Meanwhile, as outside observers, we are

in position to say that Mamardashvili was in many ways a phenomenologist by inclination, but also something of an existentialist and a full-fledged transcendentalist to boot (we will discuss this in the next chapter). Mamardashvili's notion of transcendental philosophy followed Kant's well-known definition of transcendental knowledge as 'cognition that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects'.<sup>8</sup> This fundamental formulation captures the key rule of transcendental philosophy, that we cannot ignore the conditions of the possibility of experience. The most important thing about these conditions is that they always precede what we find in the world as experience. On the other hand, what appears to be given as fundamental and self-evident – our experiences, objects and events of the real world – is the result of the already-accomplished work of certain structures that did not find their way into our experience and will never do so. That which is given in experience cannot, therefore, be the origin of that experience, and that origin cannot be given. The conditions of our experience are not themselves objects of experience.

In these formulations, we are not dealing with esoteric parables, but with common philosophical topics. For example, some philosophers can propose that without an observer (the subject of perception or cognition) there is no world to speak of. What they mean is that 'the world' is always 'my world', with the self being the bare condition of its possibility. Is the subject, and more precisely my self, an object in this world? Is it an object or a phenomenon of this physical world, and where exactly are such objects or phenomena located? If the location is to be my body, then what exact part of it? Should it be the brain with its neural processes? But these neural processes themselves are not identical to my understanding, for example, of the fact that my consciousness is or is not a neural process. My, and only my, feelings of joy or pain, not the neural and physiological process itself, are what is accompanied by this process (joy accompanied by a rapid heartbeat, etc.). And yet, the experience of joy as meaning is not a physical reaction of the body. The meaning that is extracted from physiology cannot be physiology itself. Therefore, 'the self', 'meaning' and 'consciousness' cannot be present in the world. Instead, in an anticipatory way, they define the world. This can be demonstrated even more obviously. The world of things and phenomena, the physiology of the body and the brain are given to consciousness as a kind of meaning. They must first be understood and conceived, so that later on someone could try to explain them (explain,

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 149.

for example, the emergence of consciousness). Yet here we fall into an obvious vicious circle: consciousness, meaning and the self must already exist in order to allow something to appear that should generate and explain them – matter, the physical world, the body and the brain.

It turns out that consciousness, or, as Mamardashvili himself would say, ‘thought’, is radically primordial in nature. Nothing should be made primary to thought, not even the explanation of thought. Therefore, thought is the original origin, whose own origins must, apparently, remain a mystery. This logic of concealment directly concerns consciousness itself. In fact, any conversation *about* consciousness cannot but become a problem. The phrase ‘conversation about’ cannot apply to consciousness, because it is impossible to talk *about consciousness*. Contrary to various kinds of naturalistic approaches to consciousness, consciousness is not a ‘something’. But what do we really grasp when we attribute consciousness to ourselves or other beings? As a rule, we think of consciousness as a transparent medium which can be ignored, distracted as we are by its objects. But in thinking about it, we may try to turn it into a thing, an object. Yet consciousness is not an object, and moreover, consciousness does not appear to us at all, although it permits the world and its objects to appear.

A significant part of Mamardashvili’s philosophical work was aimed at transmitting this intuition. The following passage belongs to him and Alexander Pyatigorsky:

Consciousness is not knowledge (‘science’), it is ‘with-knowledge’ (‘con-science’), it is what we know something else in, not knowing in virtue of what we know this. We cannot turn con-sciousness (that is, the particle ‘con-’, for belonging to knowledge in the case) into an object. And this is an additional dimension of the unknowable, of the invisible, for we do not see consciousness – we see the content of consciousness, but we never see consciousness itself.<sup>9</sup>

(It is worth the digression to explain the unusual nature of Mamardashvili’s collaboration with Pyatigorsky, who was originally a scholar of Eastern philosophy and Buddhism. Having met in the 1960s, the two thinkers quickly understood that their seemingly different philosophic preferences nevertheless had a common basis in their interest in philosophy of consciousness. Their friendship engendered *Symbol and Consciousness*, which would ultimately be

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<sup>9</sup> Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 129.

published in 1982, not in the Soviet Union, but in Israel.) Consciousness, then, resembles light – all things in the world are given to us through light, but light itself is not given as a thing. It is projected onto things in the optical mode of the eye – the eye allows you to see things, but it does not appear in the field of vision. In addition, no amount of studying things seen by the eye will allow us to conclude that they are seen by the eye. Therefore, no amount of careful study of the manifested world will allow us to enter an understanding of the causes of the emergence of the world itself. All the causes found in the world, whether they be the laws of nature or the principles of human development, cannot answer the question of why, in principle, the world and the human should have emerged. Why does the very cause of the appearance of the world arise? The answer to the question why the world is such as it is and not otherwise, or why it exists at all, is not the cause of this world. An explanation of the Big Bang would not explain the necessity of the world's emergence. If there can be no reason for the very first causes, then the very existence of existence must be recognized as causeless.

If Mamardashvili was a religious thinker, it is only in this philosophical argument that the beginning of the world is a sacrament given to humankind as the result of creation. It appears that examining the contents of the world we inhabit cannot yield its meaning or the principles of its generation. Mamardashvili supplies the following illustration:

Imagine some dominoes, not ordinary ones, but with numbers written on both sides of the tiles. What is more, one side (say, that which is visible to us) has one set of numbers on it, and the other side – invisible to ourselves but visible to another creature who moves the tiles around – has a different set of numbers. The creature moves the tiles according to the laws of arithmetic and the numbers that are visible to it. For example, one tile has number 1 on it, the other – number 2, and the creature wants to produce the sum, 3, and places the tiles together accordingly. But, on our own side, entirely different numbers are set in motion in a completely different order, so that the sequence is unintelligible when observed from our side. Not being able to see the face side of the dominoes, we can see no intelligible order in the movements of the numbers on our side, on our screen.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Merab Mamardashvili, 'Phenomenology Is a Moment of Any Philosophy' ['Феноменология – момент всякой философии'], in 'Phenomenology and its role in contemporary philosophy' ['Феноменология и её роль в современной философии'], roundtable discussion, *Voprosy filosofii*, 8, 1988, 3.

This theme of his philosophy can be described as follows: the important things are hidden from our vision. Not only consciousness, but also language, culture, the world as a cosmos and as ultimate existence, are given to the human being in a mode 'everything having already taken place', so that what we observe is the result of the hidden work of generation; similarly, one can only find oneself as already thinking, already endowed with language and with symbolic cultural codes. It is not possible for humanity to trace its own continuity from a pre-linguistic state to the state of being endowed with language, from the state of unconsciousness to that of consciousness or from the emptiness of non-existence to existence. We have no experience of silence, unthinking or nonexistence. In other words, you cannot be the subject of silence, unthinking or nonexistence. This is why the traditional Cartesian subject is introduced as the self, which is always already there and thinks in concepts (i.e. in language).

The nine themes presented here form the principal assumptions of Mamardashvili's philosophical approach. Although this list is not a comprehensive account but a distillation, I believe these to be the main keys to an understanding of Mamardashvili's philosophy, which we will now proceed to consider. Even though Mamardashvili was not keen on defining his philosophy and almost never spoke of other philosophers as representatives of a school, he was sympathetic to three particular philosophical directions: transcendental philosophy, phenomenology and existentialism. In his talks, he frequently resorted to the terms derived from those philosophical directions. For example, he would talk about a 'phenomenological tone', an 'existential subtext', a 'transcendental turn', and so on. All three words, 'transcendental', 'phenomenological' and 'existential' were often heard in his lectures and presentations. Let us examine to what extent his own philosophy can be attributed to any of these three currents.

**PART 2**

*Signposts*







## Transcendental Philosophy

Mamardashvili's philosophical method can be viewed as a special form of the transcendental approach, which he elaborated with an authorial stance both unique to himself and also reliant on the established ideas within this particular philosophical framework. He insisted on the extra-natural (or, as he put it, the 'non-natural') character of consciousness. Foremost in this idea is his thesis of the invalidity of objectifying approaches to consciousness, which systematically overlook what is essentially the transcendental character of any phenomenology. Consciousness is not a thing or an object. It is that which comes before objects and things, somehow making possible a conversation about them. Consciousness is best described by Kant's well-known formula of the transcendental as the 'condition of possibility' of objects, which itself cannot be discovered as yet another object. The interest of Mamardashvili's transcendental approach resides in its emphasis on the extra-natural, non-objectifying and non-empirical character of consciousness.

Despite the fact that the term 'naturalism' was rarely used in Russian philosophy of the Soviet period, 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 the identification of the mental with the physical. The real is that which is extended or, in more contemporary terms, that which is measurable. In the naturalist view, 'the real' denotes any objectification: what is real is what is or can be an object. But how do we understand an 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 of an object could, then, be most effective for naturalism and its possible opponents? An 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 isolated from the observer and the observation process. It is that which can be posited *before* thought and perception, while maintaining a clear boundary between the observer (or the subject) and the observed (or the object). In this way, the definition of an object in naturalism will be, in its own way, dispositional. Such aspects as 'materiality' or 'ideality' recede into the background, opening up space for the property of the total separability of the observable (and thinkable) from the non-observable (and unthinkable). In a broad sense, an object is a something (a 'substance') that can be separated and isolated on its own.

With these basic definitions we can now consider how consciousness is conceptualized by Mamardashvili. In doing so, we will attempt to understand in what sense his approach to consciousness challenges the naturalist view, and what constitutes the originality of his own philosophy of consciousness. 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 the contemporary philosophy of consciousness.

In their joint work *Symbol and Consciousness*, Mamardashvili and Alexander Pyatigorsky suggested a criticism of the grounds of positive naturalist theories of consciousness – precisely those theories in which consciousness figures as an object that can be considered from a genus-species viewpoint or under the aspect of subject-object dualism. To return to an already-quoted passage from this work, consciousness

is not knowledge ('science'), it is 'with-knowledge' ('con-science'), it is what we know something else in, not knowing in virtue of what we know this. ... We cannot turn con-consciousness (that is, the particle 'con-', for belonging to knowledge in the case) into an object. And this is an additional dimension of the unknowable, of the invisible, for we do not see consciousness – we see the content of consciousness, but we never see consciousness itself.<sup>1</sup>

How should we understand this statement? It implies that we cannot speak of consciousness as we would of a regular object of investigation. Consciousness cannot be turned into an object at all. Contrary to naturalistic approaches to consciousness, for Mamardashvili consciousness is not a 'thing'. But what, then, do we mean when asserting our own consciousness or that of another being? What are we missing when resorting to such a circular truism? What essential things do we overlook when considering consciousness as a transparent medium which can be ignored, concentrating instead on objects themselves and on further attempts to objectify it? Consciousness is never an object; moreover, consciousness never appears to us, although it allows the world to appear. The entirety of Mamardashvili's philosophical work was, in a sense, dedicated to this very intuition. Mamardashvili's peculiar performative manner of presenting his philosophical views was more than a mere idiosyncrasy, since it was continuous with the contents of his phenomenological sensibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 129.

The central thought of the passage just quoted resides in the fact that it is not possible to speak ‘about’ consciousness; this upsets the prospects of developing a theory of consciousness. The main argument supporting the proposition that consciousness cannot become an object of theoretical reasoning is the transcendental intuition or, broadly speaking, the classical phenomenological argument. Only with the help of consciousness itself can we discover anything whatsoever. Consciousness is the initial step, with no possible prior step available. This involves a boundedness, finitude or a foundational nature, which several branches of philosophy customarily address. It is not simply an initial step. It also fits into the well-known definition of the transcendental by Kant: ‘I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects.’<sup>2</sup> This fundamental formulation captures the first rule of transcendental philosophy: that one cannot ignore the conditions that make our experiences possible. The most important thing in these conditions is that *they always precede* what is given, and therein lies their fundamental original nature. It is in this sense that consciousness is fundamentally original for Mamardashvili. I will call this feature of consciousness *primordial*, using Husserl’s term. If we do find ourselves in the world of things, we must know that prior to this, we are in the world of consciousness.

Any attempt to comprehend it deterministically – that is, to reconstruct deterministically the initial conditions – already contains covertly in itself these very conditions. But they are not the type of initial conditions that should be understood as genetically precedent – the genetically precedent initial condition is lost and remains irretrievable.<sup>3</sup>

Only through consciousness are things given to us in experience. But if this is so, then defining consciousness itself – getting ahead of it, so to speak – is impossible. Consciousness does not detect itself as an entity. What is essential is not its non-physical nature but the fact that it does not objectify itself, either as a thing or as an idea. Its position relative to the bearer of consciousness itself is that of paradoxical coincidence; one cannot distance or 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

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2 Kant, 133.

3 Merab Mamardashvili, Alexander Pyatigorsky, *Symbol and Consciousness* [Символ и сознание] (Moscow: Merab Mamardashvili Foundation, 2011), 26. All quotations from this work are based on Rodion Garshin’s unpublished English translation, with editorial changes made for the present edition.

aware of her own consciousness: she knows that she is conscious, is conscious of her own consciousness.

The fact that we know about our consciousness might encourage us to maintain that it can be objectified. However, this is not the case. The 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) could be possible. But does its 'objectness' automatically follow from its existence? If *something* exists, does it mean that this *something* is an object (a thing or a substance)? It is precisely against these linkages that a critique of naturalism emerges, since naturalism insists on such linkages. Yet, all that we find in Mamardashvili as co-authored with Pyatigorsky is indicative of his intuition of a disjunction between the existence of consciousness and the possibility of grasping it as some object, thing or substance.

For this reason, the possibility of a traditional theory of consciousness is confronted with two main difficulties. First, as for descriptions of consciousness, 'any attempt of description already contains those means and conditions whose origin, as a matter of fact, is to be inquired into'.<sup>4</sup> Second, in order to consider consciousness, one needs to suspend it. 'Consciousness turns into cognition and ceases to be consciousness for the duration.'<sup>5</sup> We will revisit these difficulties later; for the time being, what is notable is that the theory of consciousness encounters difficulties because it presumes the separability of objects. Most theories are built on the basis of a simplistic division between subject matter and method. The theory must have a subject to which a set of tools, or a method, is applied. This being said, the subject matter must not be reduced to method. But if subject matter comes to be superimposed on the method, effectively coinciding with it, then the theory is built on some metaphysical grounds.

It is precisely such a metaphysical nature of any theory of consciousness which is pointed out by Mamardashvili. In this connection, he effectively calls our attention to the necessity of abandoning the rhetoric of explanatory strategies in relation to consciousness. As a rule, explanatory approaches cannot avoid making reference to the distinction of subject matter and method. To explain is to reveal the causal relationship between one and the other. We explain something when we reproduce the connection between concepts or phenomena. Apart from this, an explanation assumes the presence of genus-species relations. To explain is to find the genus in a species or to embed the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

species in a 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 a consequence overlooks the point made earlier, that nothing precedes consciousness; it is substantial in the classical philosophical sense as something that begins with itself, and with itself alone. One of the identifying features of the non-objectivity of consciousness is its superfluousness to the object-logic of the material world. Consciousness is transcendental, in the sense that it organizes the manifestations of the world as object-based (material or abstract), but cannot itself be manifested as an object, whether that 'object' be a thing or an abstract concept.

We have just described consciousness negatively, as a lack: it does not exist, though all else exists by virtue of its presence. We grasp its nature at that moment when we attempt to find consciousness within things and understand that it cannot be there, just as the hall of a theatre cannot simultaneously be its stage. Consciousness, according to Mamardashvili, is that transcendental condition which, being closest to us, can never be found in the world as something distinct from ourselves. Therefore, to speak of it as an object (or even to speak *about* it in general) is incoherent. Consciousness is that *through which* and not that *which*; it is more apt to be described as a certain *how* than as a certain *what*. Its most vivid metaphor involves *light*, by which we see all things though we do not see light itself.

If, nevertheless, we immerse ourselves into the world of things and focus on its own inner logic and then return once again to the issue of consciousness, we can discover the *surplus nature of consciousness*, its 'optional' standing in the world.<sup>6</sup> From the naturalistic perspective, consciousness of the world is unnecessary, for it is in no way involved in natural processes. Consciousness occurs in nature as an unnatural development, derivable from no pre-existing natural properties and irreducible to any such properties.

When we speak of the structures of consciousness, we speak about structures that do not exist naturally, in the sense that they are not inherent in ourselves as natural beings. They emerge not logically and psychologically (that is, not from our intentions and mental life), but on the basis of the process within whose scope we should investigate the phenomena of consciousness and of conscious symbolic structures related to

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6 Alyssa DeBlasio, 'Mamardashvili on Film: Cinema as a Metaphor for Consciousness', *Studies in East European Thought*, v. 71, 3 (October 2019), 217–27.

the emergence of the effects that we observe in the world, *post factum*. Consequently, should we eliminate the concept of conscious structures, we would in no way be able to explain (or even distinguish) the existence or occurrence of the former in the world – just as we would never be able to explain the phenomena of human willfulness – a manifestation of human freedom.<sup>7</sup>

We have no satisfactory theory which would explain why there should exist such an amazing capability as to know oneself and to possess an interiority.

Philosophy, or thought – the very necessity of thinking – exists because we are not born in a natural way. Thus, in a sense, thought is an element of the organ through which humans are born; as a necessary element, thought partakes in the very birth of a human – of what we intuitively understand to be specific to the human. After all, we know that man is not simply an upright bipedal creature, etc. – we see something else specific to the human (we know it when we see it), although it is, of course, impossible to define it. What is specifically human is what is brought forth on an unnatural, non-mechanistic and non-automatic basis, and what we call thought is a partaker of this birth.<sup>8</sup>

Why is consciousness superfluous to the world? Because the world does not require the presence of something that comprehends it. This world appears as that which exists, and does not require any awareness within it; if it does assume it, then such an awareness must be contingent and incidental.

Of course, one could reproach such a logic on the very grounds that it assumes a disjunction between consciousness and the world, severing their possible connections and rejecting the intuition of primordial consciousness. As Catherine Malabou expresses it, ‘this emptied out, neutral, estranged world is indifferent to the fact of thought about it.’<sup>9</sup> This description injects meaning into the plan to relinquish the transcendental dimension and transcendental philosophy, bringing it closer to the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux, one of the radical opponents of transcendental philosophy. When Mamardashvili speaks of the unnaturalness of consciousness, is there not a contradiction

7 Merab Mamardashvili, *The Necessity of the Self. On Consciousness* [Необходимость себя. О сознании] (Moscow: Labirint, 1996), 221.

8 Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 52–53.

9 Catherine Malabou, ‘The Brain of History, or, The Mentality of the Anthropocene’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, v. 116, 1 (2017), 39–53.

lurking in his view? The world is set apart from consciousness; it is conceivable without it. The nature of the world lies in the fact of its existence, whereas consciousness comes in from another sphere. This signifies that there is a moment when consciousness does not exist, meaning that it is somehow possible to know the world in which consciousness is not yet present and that, out of such a non-conscious world, awareness can emerge. It is clear that we are in a tangle, but the reason for this muddle lies in the not entirely rightful distinction between the transcendental and non-transcendental.

Contemporary problematizers of transcendental philosophy like Malabou and Meillassoux build upon a number of philosophical influences (such as Martin Heidegger) and their insights into being-in-the-world that is always already grasped by the consciousness. If there is to be no world apart from consciousness, and likewise no consciousness apart from the world, then the affinity of consciousness and world is given as reconciliatory, primordial and establishing their joint co-presence. If consciousness and the world are not separated, as has been assumed by dualistic models, but mutually conditioned, then consciousness can no longer be considered unnatural for the world, its existence intended by the world just as the world has been intended by consciousness.

Following this logic, consciousness can still preserve its transcendental qualities (as it does for Heidegger) – being germane to the world, it is always already *of* the world without existing *in* it. Consciousness cannot be classified as belonging to anything in existence, neither to things nor ideas, for it is not ontological. But despite the conditional nature of this Heideggerian logic, opponents of the transcendental approach see it as sufficient for demonstrating the alienation of the world, its ‘tender indifference’, as phrased by Albert Camus, so that, with the relinquishment of transcendentalist prospects, consciousness becomes of no use to the world, their connection severed in favor of the world’s self-sufficiency. Consciousness, then, becomes redundant and epiphenomenal, a meaningless appendage prompting the resurgence of the age-old philosophical question: Why is the world comprehended? We can trace several attempts to address this question made by Mamardashvili.

When Mamardashvili speaks about the unnatural nature of consciousness, he does not mean a possibility of separating it from the world, or a rejection of the phenomenological laws insisting on the fundamental intentionality of consciousness, or even a parting with the radical primordial standing of consciousness. Consciousness is always of the world, but it is impossible to approach this consciousness of the world from a position which does not already involve it. Consciousness is always oriented-towards, but the absence of consciousness is not a given. Consciousness always persists as ‘already-consciousness’, for



we have no experience which would anticipate, get ahead of consciousness. Unfortunately, this does not imply its meaningfulness or existential closeness, just as it does not offer any clarity in the eternal pursuit of an answer to the question 'Why is there something instead of nothing?'. It does not follow from its orientation towards objects, or from the transcendental work of consciousness that makes this world transcendently intelligible, that there should be any existential understanding, any sense of comfort or guarantee of 'coziness'. I shape this world but I do not understand it. I live in the world made under my transcendental demands but I am still not at home in it. The world is located in my space and my time, but I am at a loss in this world and keep asking: What is the point of this time and of this space? Why am I here and why am I such as I am? Why is my transcendental dimension such and not other? Why do I have so many categories? I may have created this world but why should I now live in it? And did I really make free choices when I created this world? Did I have any choice at all?

We have already quoted Mamardashvili's statement of the non-automatic, non-natural and non-mechanical manner of dwelling by a human in the world. If the world is mine, why do I not flow from it, why do I not fit into its logic? It seems to me that an answer to this question might have represented that special meaning of the transcendental philosophy of consciousness which Mamardashvili was seeking after. His logic allows us to speak of a special transcendental anthropology, of an exclusively transcendental nature particular to humanity and to 'the human within a human'. This is the structure of a fundamental inward fracture and schism, the absence of any common origin for a human and the world which could reconcile them in their existence. The human is the one whose existence and thought are describable as contrarian, against the grain of the rest. In the world without humanity, there are no meanings which might organize this world as humane, and humans are gifted with this understanding. Within the world, there is neither metaphysics nor values, nor meaning, but only man who always looks upon the world, consciously or not, through the prisms of metaphysics, values and meaning.

The originality of Mamardashvili's transcendental thought can be crystallized in the thesis: I know exactly how the world should be, though I do not find it in that condition. We have a sufficiently distinct representation (though it is 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. Having determined this, we can act in two possible ways, and are fundamentally free in our choice of either path. We 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 its transcendent image. In this sense, from the perspective of the transcendental nature of consciousness, both choices will prove to be analogous, both of them being based on an awareness of a mismatch between the *is* and the *ought*. The two paths will nevertheless differ in their practical implications for being in the world. In one case, we would systematically direct our attention to the effects of the transcendental. In the other case, attention would be drawn to the transcendent.

The first scenario described above characterizes our consciousness in the mode of our everyday mindset; the second corresponds to the philosophical mindset. In both cases, however, the human must systematically reach beyond the natural order of phenomena. She is guided, in her 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 habitual and domesticated as to prevent us from noticing the difference between the natural and the non-natural (the *is* and the *ought*). Nor can we perceive the world in its non-transcendental nature. Such a world would be devoid of any clarity. Therefore, it is more likely the case that the world becomes intelligible through our effort. This situation can neither eliminate the sensation of effort nor allow us to encounter the world while eschewing effort. A human constitutes his world in the mode of 'as if', but the irrevocability of the conditional does not permit him to merge with the world, to become at one with and at home in it; this connection is always contrary to nature as is the very fact of human existence in the world.

We have thus attempted to understand how the transcendental in Mamardashvili designates a mode of being human in which all that is human stands apart from the world of natural facts and objects. All that is essential to the human, all that which makes someone human (values, consciousness, free will and meaning) are not to be encountered in the world of natural phenomena. In nature, there is brain, but no consciousness; in nature, there is no freedom but physical determination, and there are no values. It is senseless to ask whether the fact that the grass is green or that bodies fall downwards should be deemed good or bad.

A human being is superfluous to the world which she or he inhabits and does not proceed from its laws. This may constitute the center of the drama of human existence. Searching for one's self in the world, with the aid of science or literature and the arts, overlooks the mental, meaning-and-value-based essence of the human. All attempts of reconstructing the totality of what is human lack in wholeness, either being deficient or misleading. Humanity remains the 'framing condition' of the world, firmly rooted in this world but

invariably reaching beyond it. The world is always conjoined with the human, and it is always a human world – and yet, the human is nowhere to be found in it.

This is especially evident in human consciousness, which shapes and appropriates the world but does not find itself in this world. It provides an opportunity to perceive the physicality of objects, at the cost of its own fundamental non-materiality. It allows us to think about objects, by means of its paradoxical non-objectivity. It generates knowledge organized into theories, but cannot itself form the foundation of theoretical knowledge. Consciousness is that light by which we see everything while the light itself remains invisible. This ‘invisibility’ implies its resistance to objectification. It turns out that what is most significant is that which we ourselves are and that which is hidden within us. When I know, I occupy a point that cannot fall within the field of my own vision. It is closest of all to me, it even coincides with me, and therefore cannot be outside of me. Mamardashvili illustrates this with the image of a shadow, inalienable from my body, which casts it; it makes evident the light whose source I cannot see but know of by the testimony of my shadow.

Insofar as an object is understood as something that can be isolated and externalized from ourselves, any and all attempts to construct a theory of consciousness will systematically entangle us in paradoxes. A consciousness that objectifies things cannot be simultaneously objectified. One cannot at once observe and be the object of observation. The transcendental nature of consciousness and the very principle of the transcendental are determined by this extraordinary and yet very simple rule: the very nature of observation consists in omitting the point from which observation is conducted. The process of observation constitutes no part of the picture that it produces. And yet, it is implicit 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, having suspended any objective representations (and they must be suspended, because I think only when I am within the thought, that is, in the ‘topos’ of thought), I cannot from some third side, from a position external to this, look at myself performing the act of thought. Once I am within a thought, I think of the thought and nothing else. It is an objectless and subjectless thought. And it is the condition of the existential act of human existence as a possible event in the world. It is, again, the basis for the transcendental outlook on the world, or the

transcendental consciousness, from the standpoint of which we consider what is spoken as the potentiality of the world that is being spoken about.<sup>10</sup>

I quote these passages not only to acquaint the reader with the originality of Mamardashvili's philosophical thought, but also to suggest the fundamental and significant distinctiveness of his philosophy of consciousness from some naturalistic approaches to consciousness represented in contemporary phenomenology. Given their programmatic nature, it was important to show these differences. In contemporary philosophy, the divergences between continental (mainly transcendental) and analytical branches of phenomenology have been growing increasingly significant. The latter considers it possible only to attest to the reality of consciousness and its irreducibility to physical processes. When we declare that consciousness exists and that it is necessary to 'take it seriously', we take a phenomenological position. If thereupon we undertake a search for this consciousness, exploring the universe of things and objects in our quest, and constructing an ontology suitable to this pursuit, we still remain on phenomenological positions, so long as we believe in the autonomy of consciousness.

In contrast, transcendental phenomenology, especially in its contemporary forms, which Mamardashvili has done much to develop and preserve, stresses the fundamentally non-objective 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 happens to be in this respect. It is senseless to search for it as a thing among other things, within atoms, waves, strings 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 which one simply needs to assume, we commit a radical error, by overlooking the most important thing about consciousness – its primordial standing in the world of objects and phenomena. Consciousness precedes all conversation, not just any conversations about things. Consciousness always appears beforehand, and, in that sense, it is fundamental (or substantial, in terms of classical philosophy). But it is not fundamental in terms of the fundamental laws of nature, the fundamental laws of the observable world, because it is not in the world. Consciousness cannot be found in the world insofar as the world appears on the heels of consciousness, arising from consciousness.

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<sup>10</sup> Mamardashvili, 'Phenomenology Is a Moment of Any Philosophy', 58.

Consciousness is always prior to the world, and the natural work of thought is orchestrated in such a way 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 that takes us back to that step, to that neglected condition, suggesting that this environment may be invisible and transparent, but that does not entail its non-existence. This work on the return to the beginning and the revelation of the latent conditions of immersion into the world is regularly performed by Mamardashvili's phenomenology.

## Phenomenology

Let us now consider the phenomenological roots of Mamardashvili's philosophy. The source of phenomenological reflection in Mamardashvili is clear. He states that 'phenomenology is a moment of any philosophy'<sup>1</sup> and this is an opinion that he upholds distinctly in his work. At the same time, he claims that 'what I know about phenomenology, in the sense of it as a problem, is not from Husserl at all. And it is natural, because it is about a phenomenon, about the phenomenal substance of thought, how it springs up (again and again) in a self-embodying existence of the human thought.'<sup>2</sup> Mamardashvili was himself aware of the non-canonical nature of his phenomenology. To grasp at once the substance of these differences, we can say that what distinguished Mamardashvili from classical phenomenologists was that he applied phenomenological intuitions in his philosophy without developing a pure phenomenology of his own. He worked as a phenomenologist but did not consider it an obligatory philosophical duty, nor did he see phenomenology as a field with which he should professionally identify himself. Still, he resorted to phenomenological devices, and these can be seen interspersing his philosophy. Mamardashvili's philosophical method can be termed a special form of phenomenology. It replicated many of the steps of Husserlian phenomenology, supplementing them with the author's particular solutions. As we will see below, the Mamardashvilian version of phenomenology might have been called 'deep phenomenology', 'semantic phenomenology' or the 'phenomenology of the event'. If we take into account his particular interpretation of 'meaning' (namely, this concept's functioning in the Russian language), Mamardashvili himself might be called a 'Russian phenomenologist'.

What are, then, the main phenomenological moves made by Mamardashvili? One of the main phenomenological motifs in Mamardashvili's philosophy is the idea of the fundamental non-objectivity of consciousness and of the impossibility of constructing a naturalistic ontology accounting for the experience of consciousness. 'Non-objectivity' does not stand merely for the non-physical nature of consciousness, but also for the logical impossibility of a positive grasp of consciousness in terms of subject-object relations. Consciousness is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 56.

not an object; moreover, consciousness cannot be manifested at all, though it allows things and the world to manifest themselves.

A significant part of Mamardashvili's philosophical work was aimed at making intelligible the principal and fundamental origin of consciousness. The main argument against making consciousness an object of theorizing becomes a phenomenological intuition, accounting for the well-known phenomenological predilection for describing experiences instead of building theories. Only with the help of consciousness itself can we discover anything. It is that initial position beyond which there is no retreat. If we do encounter things in the world, we must know that, before those things, we encountered consciousness. For this reason,

any attempt to comprehend it deterministically – that is, to reconstruct deterministically the initial conditions – already contains these very conditions in covert form. But they are not the kind of initial conditions which are supposedly genetically prior – the genetically prior initial condition is lost and remains irretrievable.<sup>3</sup>

So, only through consciousness are things given to us. If so, we cannot outstrip consciousness by getting ahead of it. Consciousness does not reveal itself as a thing, and it is not its non-physical (non-material) nature that is essential here, but that it cannot be objectified, either as a thing or as an idea. Its situation relative to ourselves as its bearers is paradoxical: it coincides with us and cannot be removed or isolated. You cannot stand in relation to it because you cannot conceptualize it. It merges with the observer, though he or she is aware of his or her own consciousness; we are aware of our consciousness and aware of the awareness.

The fact that we know about our consciousness might lead us to conceive the possibility of objectifying it, but, in pursuing this possibility, we are certain to be frustrated. Knowing about our consciousness permits us to say no more than that it is. If this were otherwise, no conversation about consciousness, asserting it or denying it, would be possible. And yet, does its 'objectness' automatically follow from its existence? If something exists, does it mean that this 'something' should be an object (a thing, an entity)? It is against this identity that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology takes its stand, and Mamardashvili never tires of invoking it. All available evidence indicates that Husserl and Mamardashvili share the intuition of undoing the connection

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<sup>3</sup> Mamardashvili, Pyatigorsky, 26.

between the existence of consciousness and its availability to be grasped as an object, a thing or an entity.

Consciousness is not knowledge ('science'), it is 'with-knowledge' ('con-science'), it is what we know something else in, not knowing in virtue of what we know this. We cannot turn con-consciousness (that is, the particle 'con-', for belonging to knowledge in the case) into an object. And this is an additional dimension of the unknowable, of the invisible, for we do not see consciousness – we see the content of consciousness, but we never see consciousness itself.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it turns out that the creation of a traditional theory of consciousness is associated with two main difficulties. First, 'any attempt of describing it already contains those means and conditions whose origin, as a matter of fact, is to be inquired into'.<sup>5</sup> Second, awareness of consciousness requires that consciousness itself be suspended. 'Consciousness turns into cognition and ceases to be consciousness for the duration.'<sup>6</sup> We will discuss these complex issues in more detail further on.

Theories of consciousness encounter difficulties because theory as such assumes the isolation of its object. The majority of theories are constructed on the basis of a banal distinction between subject matter and method. A theory must begin with subject matter, to which some set of tools, or a method, is then applied. Subject matter must not be reducible to the method itself. If the object of theorizing begins to overlap with the method, effectively coinciding with it, it can be stated that the theory is based on some metaphysical foundations. This is precisely the metaphysical nature of any theory about consciousness that Mamardashvili points to.

In the humanities ... one operates the concept of a unitary continuum 'being-consciousness', and to consider 'being' and 'consciousness' only as its distinct moments, contemplating the domains where the classical distinctions between subject and object, reality and mode of representation, actual and imaginary, etc., become meaningless.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 129.

5 Mamardashvili, Pyatigorsky, 25.

6 *Ibid.*, 20.

7 Merab Mamardashvili, *Transformations of Form: The Forms and Contents of Thought* [Превращение формы. Формы и содержание мышления] (Moscow: Mamardashvili Foundation, 2011), 261.



It is common knowledge that phenomenology proceeds from Kant's transcendental philosophy, although it does reassess it on a number of fundamental points. The main thing preserved by Husserl's phenomenology (which he himself calls transcendental) is the radical origin of the fact of consciousness, which does not presuppose its own reconstruction. Nothing can be learned about consciousness in the sense of 'how it came to be' or 'where it emerged from', although, to a certain extent, it is possible to understand how it operates (in the sense of a purely descriptive depiction of transcendental structures or *a priori* forms of consciousness): this is as true of Husserl as of Kant. Mamardashvili radicalizes this moment of the inexplicability of consciousness. We are aware of everything with the aid of consciousness, but we are not aware of consciousness itself.

Mamardashvili casts his particular tone not only on phenomenology but also on the transcendental method. There is something created by the thinker – we might call it a transcendental structure. In brief, Mamardashvili's idea of the transcendental method consists in the impossibility of constructing a form created by ourselves (as thinking entities) as some technological mechanism understandable and controlled by us. The fact that we have been created, tailored, and made should be taken as something that has already occurred, a given in *post-factum* mode. My consciousness is given to me through the irrevocability of my once-occurring autonomy – none of us participated in the creation of our thinking self or in creating our own thinking. On the contrary, I accept myself as a reality, I accept my consciousness as a gift (a gift from above, a gift of the gods). Mamardashvili repeatedly refers to the idea of the factuality of consciousness and of the discovery of oneself in the *already*-occurring as an 'act of prime capacity'. He calls it 'the scandal of the factuality of reason', the discovery of which 'serves the phenomenological disclosure of the visible'. The world is always already there (not in terms of real events, but in terms of where these events are bound to occur), but I myself am also always already there (not as a concrete personality, who has yet to achieve fruition, who in an existential way chooses her project, but as someone who will achieve fruition, who will choose).

Another substantial idea of Mamardashvili's phenomenology is the idea that human consciousness is involved in something more than itself – in other words, the idea of the inclusion of the individual in something supra-individual. If we proceed from the phenomenological idea of duality of being and consciousness and their simultaneous identity, then the idea of the inclusion of individual being-consciousness should be understood as the idea of inclusion in the encompassing, ultimate being-consciousness. Specifically, this is what Mamardashvili says:

First of all, there is another world, and if we have any commitments in this world, then these commitments are inexplicable within this world itself, unless we assume that we borrowed them or entered into them in another world. Second, without knowing these laws or commitments we, nonetheless, obey them in this life: after all, in life we are sometimes kind, conscientious, selfless. Not knowing who has inscribed these laws within us, we are brought closer to them by any deep labor of mind, and they are invisible to those who does not perform this labor of mind.<sup>8</sup>

In this question, Mamardashvili acts as a genuine transcendental philosopher, since he does not consider the 'other world' to be 'transcendent'. On the contrary, this world is transcendental – it is situated closest to ourselves. These are the transcendental structures through which we perceive the world. This is why the world appears to the human being as meaningful and endowed with value, for we constitute its phenomena through these transcendental structures. The absolute categories of goodness or perfection are not distant and unattainable, the way they are in Plato. The transcendent is not something that we cannot know, because if we could not know it, we could not know that it is unknowable. If the transcendent were introduced in a Platonic fashion, as the transcendent world of ideas, this paradox would inevitably arise, as indeed runs the frequent line of criticism with respect to the philosophical doctrine of 'things-in-themselves' (noumena). Nothing, then, can be said about the transcendent as being radically unknown.

True 'transcendence' can only reside in the transcendental – in something that cannot be known in principle but *through which* something may be known. The transcendental, therefore, cannot be known, not because it is absolutely incomprehensible, but because it is absolutely intelligible, the most intelligible of all. Such are, for example, the transcendental structures of space and time, causality and ethical categories of goodness, justice, etc.

It is common knowledge that Husserlian phenomenology effectively let go of the world of noumena and things-in-themselves. The performative paradoxes of agnosticism or apophatic theology – which propose that we can know nothing about the unknowable except that we somehow know that it is unknowable – are resolved in phenomenology in favor of a true suspension of judgment. The unknowable is neither affirmed nor denied: it is ignored. Phenomenology encourages us to focus entirely on phenomena and their

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8 Merab Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path* [Психологическая топология пути] (Moscow: Mamardashvili Foundation, 2015), I, 13.

description, as if they were all that exists. Mamardashvili seems to be influenced by this paradigm. With respect to rejecting the idea of the transcendent existence of ideals, he reasons like a phenomenologist. For him, they are not transcendent but transcendental, and with their help we get to know the world.

The idea of the Kingdom of God is not a real, attainable ideal to which the human race aspires, and which can be realized in the future – that is not the point. The point is the distinction present and operative at any given moment within every, even the smallest thing. It does not imply that, first of all, some perfect objective metaphysical world exists and, second, that that world lies ahead of our progress. Therefore, representations of another world can only be symbols of our life through which it is organized, and not ideas that indicate a possible objectification of another world in this life.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Mamardashvili operates as a transcendental phenomenologist, even though he always remained faithful to Kant.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that he did not dare speak directly about his canonical affiliation with Husserlian phenomenology precisely because Kant's classical legacy remained germane to him. We may still ask whether he did consider himself a phenomenologist, and, in answer, it can only be certain that he reflected on his own phenomenological manner, attempting to trace its sources and genesis.

By Mamardashvili's own admission, his path to phenomenology began with the analysis of Marx's concept of 'inverted forms'. Here is what he himself wrote:

After Marx (by the way, we were led to this position through Marx, or at least I was), philosophy shifted to the intuition of ... object-active structures, 'objectivities of thought' as the living, non-mental reality of the soul. This implied an intuitive understanding that these structures exist in the world, that are dimensionally larger or infinitely smaller than the two-dimensional efficient rational action.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Ibid., 140.

10 Alyssa DeBlasio, 'Merab Mamardashvili: Kant, Descartes, and the History of Philosophy', *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, (2018).

11 Mamardashvili, 'Phenomenology Is a Moment of Any Philosophy', 56.

What is an 'inverted form'? 'The inverted form is ... the form of existence of consciousness within and without'. We are talking about a philosophical model proposed by Hegel (but primarily drawn from Kant, albeit in a redacted form).

This apparent form of actual relations, distinct from their internal connection, along with that plays – precisely in virtue of its distinctness and beingness – the role of an independent mechanism governing the actual processes on the system's surface.<sup>12</sup>

Consciousness itself forms what it then recognizes and encounters in the world as external. But consciousness itself can shape what is 'external' only because it is no longer fully individual. Rather, it is the individuation of some primary and final supra-individuality. Hegel will consider this model sufficient to sublimate the ambivalent and unproductive duality of the internal and the external. There is a uniform self-cognizant world that is conscious of itself through individual human experience. However, this individuality is not rigid – it is only a fluid, finite, changeable and transitory experience of the unique whole – the Absolute.

Marx adopts these theses in his philosophy of inverted forms. According to Marx, the consciousness that produces various symbolic artifacts (such as society, culture, language and industrial relations) ultimately believes these phenomena to be primary and itself to be derived from them. In other words, consciousness first 'makes' the world and then declares itself to be derived from it or engendered by it. Form here substitutes content, and cause substitutes effect. There is a certain circularity in the formation of consciousness, which shapes the practices that in return shape it. Mamardashvili adopts the idea of absorbing consciousness into a certain 'superstructure', but, unlike Marx, he would never discuss the conditions of the formation of consciousness and its appearance in the world. He would never speak of consciousness as a consequence, product or epiphenomenal creation, because, as we have seen in previous chapters, naturalism was wholly alien to him.

Mamardashvili would also proceed from the assumption that consciousness actively shapes its objects of perception (phenomena), though it is not aware of this activity and takes its objects for granted. The task of the phenomenologist is to gently awaken consciousness to this state of affairs – that it perceives objects of its own creation. The phenomenologist shifts our attention from object-phenomena with 'external' status to object-phenomena with an

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<sup>12</sup> Mamardashvili, *Transformations of Form*, 247.

'internal' one. Mamardashvili would retain a substantial respect for consciousness as the ultimate reality (displaying a characteristic phenomenological and transcendentalist sensibility), but would at the same time maintain that consciousness is always already connected with universal truths and meanings (signaling a Platonist inclination, but partly a Marxist one also, albeit significantly modified in relation to the original influence). In the following chapters, we will return to this theme and explore Mamardashvili's way of engaging with the idea of consciousness as a supra-individual process.

Now, let us say a few words about how Mamardashvili thinks of the act of constituting a phenomenon. Almost entirely adhering to Husserl's theory of the phenomenon, Mamardashvili agrees that every phenomenon is being itself, and every being is also a phenomenon. If I see a cup on the table, it would be meaningless to say, from a phenomenological point of view, that it is merely an 'appearance', 'a phenomenon for myself', and that the 'real' cup is 'behind the appearance of the cup' and hidden from me. A phenomenon is the limit of the reality of perception, and thereby the cup in front of me is the cup. Phenomenology brackets all speculation about what it really might be. The world beyond our perception is bracketed insofar as there can be no point in discussing it. The concept of meaning has a key role in phenomenology: since consciousness always deals with meanings, existence as given to consciousness is always meaningful, and a person lives not in the world of things, but in the world of meanings – the always already meaningful world. Mamardashvili follows this classical principle of a meaningful world in his phenomenological account, but he does supply a significant modification of his own.

First of all, Mamardashvili gives his own interpretation of several concepts of Husserlian phenomenology. A replacement of phenomenological optics in Mamardashvili concerns how meaningful perception is constructed. To explain how the phenomenon is constituted, Mamardashvili gives the same example as Husserl himself, but provides it with a different interpretation.

I can give this example (taking it from Husserl): one can see the city of Cologne, or one can see it in such a way that fulfils the meaning of 'the city of Cologne' ... So, I come to the city of Cologne and see the city of Cologne – that is, I see a certain reality. This is perception. But if the city is familiar to me, if I have lived in it, or if something has happened in it, I have some kind of a notional relationship to this city. Let us say that for me it is wrapped in some fog, or that some terrible or uncongenial events, some sort of romantic or financial drama, happened to me there; that is, apart from the city that I see with my own eyes, there is some notional evaluation of this city, some notional formation in my consciousness, no

matter whether it is on the surface of my consciousness or in the depths of my relation to the city. Imagine that I dream of the city of Cologne, but this dream does not reproduce real perceptions of space and time, and I see somehow misshapen houses, some montage of bricks, streets, lanterns – not the really visible buildings but a performance of my relation to the city of Cologne in the brick of the buildings, in lanterns and in fog, which appears in front of me, nevertheless, as a perfectly evident material vision. After all, I dream visually; the monsters I see in my dream are tangible – that is, they are made of matter, corporeal – they are the bodily and ‘fleshy’ realization of my notion of the city of Cologne – that is, of how I understand it.<sup>13</sup>

This example is derived from Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*:

The human who knows Cologne itself, and therefore possesses the genuine ‘proper meaning’ of the word ‘Cologne’, has in his contemporary actual experience something exactly corresponding to the future confirming percept. It is not, properly speaking, a representation of the percept, as, for example, the corresponding imagination would be. But just as the city is thought to be itself present to us in the percept, so the proper name ‘Cologne’ in its ‘proper meaning’ refers to the same city ‘directly’, it means that city as itself and as it is. The straightforward percept here renders the object apparent without the help of further super-ordinate acts, the object which the meaning-intention means, and *just as* the latter means it.<sup>14</sup>

What is the difference between these two passages? If Husserl claims that the completeness of the name (‘Cologne’) emerges with meaning from the direct perception of what is presented to me, Mamardashvili believes that establishing meaning is a much more complex procedure. According to Husserl, if I read the name of a city but do not have any direct perception of it, its name is not filled with meaning for me. On the contrary, as soon as I enter the city and let its colors, smells, and sounds surround me – when I see its landscape,

13 Merab Mamardashvili, *Sketches of Contemporary European Philosophy* [Очерки современной европейской философии] (Moscow: Mamardashvili Foundation, 2010), 237–39.

14 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. Dermot Moran (New York: Routledge, 2001), II, 272.

architecture, the layout of its streets and the façades of its buildings – I acquire the meaning of what ‘the city of Cologne’ is as an immediate reality.

Yet this is not exactly the case with Mamardashvili. In his view, in order for the city to reveal its meaning to me, I must have some special impressions associated with it, a certain sense of it and its value. To see the façades of houses, to feel the cobblestones of the streets under one’s feet, to immerse oneself into the sounds, colors and smells of the place does not yet mean to fill a concept or a name with meaning. All that I see may remain but a meaningless series of replaceable images; what I perceive directly does not yet amount to meaning. You can watch a movie as a sequence of stills, asking at the end: ‘So what? What did it all mean?’ We can study every detail of a certain episode – and the meaning may elude us yet. Husserl, in contrast, tells us that to see something (for example, to see ‘a house’, when what we actually see is the façade, with a window and a cutaway of the roof), we need to mentally walk around it – to attain the meaning of ‘the house’. Our eyes may see only a few wooden beams, we do not *see the house*, but instead complete it mentally. Then, it is given to us as meaning and as a phenomenon, since every perception is meaningful, but the phenomenon is the meaning itself. In contrast, Mamardashvili would say that the house could very well remain ‘a pile of wooden beams’ and that it is possible to see a house without seeing *a house*. The object is filled with meaning only when it reveals to me some meaning-value, ‘meaning-story’ or ‘meaning as personal experience’.

In order to appreciate the difference that may still be eluding us – that between Husserl’s and Mamardashvili’s respective phenomenologies – we should add a few words about Mamardashvili’s understanding of ‘meaning’. The two philosophers’ differences with respect to ‘meaning’ are conditioned by the particular sense of this word in the Russian language. For this very reason, Mamardashvili can be considered a specifically ‘Russian phenomenologist’, for he worked with the Russian-language meaning of the concept ‘meaning’. The definition of ‘meaning’ in Russian is complicated by the fact that the concept of meaning in Russian can be used in different senses. Generally, you can distinguish its aspects of *meaning-essence*, *meaning-purpose*, and *meaning-value*. The first is associated with the problem of knowing the essence of things (the typical embodiment of this approach is Plato’s ‘idea’ as the meaning of a thing, the embodiment of its essence as a prototype, model or sample). In the second sense, ‘meaning’ is understood as subordination to a particular goal, that is, as expediency or as a motive for action. In the third sense, ‘meaning’ is understood as something valuable (important, dear), and is only possible within an axiological framework, so that we would call a world devoid of value ‘meaningless’ or ‘absurd’. From these three key senses of meaning, we can deduce three

additional ones, in particular: (1) meaning responsible for the systemic-integral state of affairs, (2) meaning that functions as a kind of organizing principle and signpost, lending unity to things and to the world as a whole, (3) meaning responsible for sequence and logical coherence.

Despite the presence of these multiple aspects, we can speak of a uniform intuition of meaning, which is used by the human intellect and combines all of its properties together. If we try to generalize the wide variety of interpretations of meaning in philosophy and in the humanities from a perspective typical of Mamardashvili's phenomenology, we must draw attention to two main features of these interpretations. *Meaning is determined, first, through a broader context, and, second, through intentionality (a purposeful orientation or direction of movement)*. In addition, each of these aspects can hardly be thought of separately from all the others. For Mamardashvili, it seems that the *axiomatic* and *purposive* components of meaning were the most significant. But if the purposive component of meaning is more or less clear (as conveyed by questions like 'Why do you do this?' and 'What is the meaning of this?'), then how do we understand its axiological aspect? We know that every sentence that can be either true or false has meaning. Meaning in this case will be the state of affairs that either does or does not obtain as described by the sentence. So, the meaning of the sentence 'the green apple is on the table' will be a certain state of affairs – an apple lying on the table – a situation that may occur (exist as fact) or not.

However, it is not necessary that sentences possess *meaning* – at the very least, 'to have significance' and 'to have meaning' are different things. Investing something with meaning is akin to endowing something with value – the value of having an apple on the table (if we wish to see it as an axiological event) is not a fact in itself and is not found in the world of factual propositions. In the case of setting the value, it is enough to understand what it is, what is meant ('the apple is on the table') – that is, to possess a sensory image of the situation, or just to indicate it. In the case of establishing meaning, we want to understand *why this is so*, because it *might be there and not lie there* (the answer 'My friend put it there' will only temporarily remove the question, since the question of meaning can be reassigned in relation to the actions of the friend, etc., along the chain of causal explanations). For example, the question 'What does it signify that the apple is green?' is different from the question 'What is the meaning of the apple being green?'. Similarly, the question 'What does it signify that the apple exists?' differs from the question 'What is the meaning of an apple existing?'. The second question is an example of how it happens that when we ask about meaning, we ask about value.



Mamardashvili appears to have been persuaded that human understanding is only possible by virtue of some difficult-to-explain intuition or experience that are best expressed in phrases like ‘the meaning of the world’, ‘the meaning of life’, ‘the meaning of a narrative’, ‘the meaning of what is happening to me’. We may call this meaning ‘metaphysical’, and it can be hypothesized that metaphysical meaning, as a kind of intuition, is the foundation of human understanding, even as a matter of the simplest procedures. Although this meaning is not formulated directly (as in instances like ‘What is the meaning of what is happening?’, ‘Why is it happening?’, ‘Why does it exist?’), it enables experience itself – that is, the actual formation of phenomena. In the human world, everything is understood through meaning and the world itself is given as meaningful by virtue of this intuition – which is difficult to conceptualize but can be roughly described in a series of questions: ‘Why does anything happen at all?’ – ‘What does it express?’ – ‘Why did this story have to be told?’ – ‘Why does what is happening happen to me?’

To Mamardashvili, when we enter the city of Cologne, the phenomenon for us will not be what we simply *see* (as meaningless), but what, in doing so, we *understand*. And we always understand through *value* and *purpose*. I will be able to formulate a phenomenon as meaningful only when I understand why this city is important and valuable to me. And the importance of the city will mean possessing a certain personal experience associated with this city. Unlike Husserl, in whose view to see a house is to be able to mentally walk around it, Mamardashvili suggests that, to see a house, you need to have a certain meaningful, psychological, existential experience associated with this house. Otherwise, I can see a house, but it will be as meaningless to me as a disparate collection of wooden pieces.

The wholeness of objects is, to Mamardashvili, strictly conventional. Why do we think that a house is already a meaningful object, but a wooden stick is not? The stick can also become meaningful, if there be a valuable experience associated with it. Similarly, the house itself may not become a meaningful phenomenon in the absence of such an experience. According to Husserl, a person will not understand what ‘white snow’ or ‘blue sea’ are if he or she lives in a desert and has never seen either the snow or the sea – for such a person possesses no direct correlation of the name with the experience. According to Mamardashvili, a person will not understand what snow or the sea is even if he or she catches snowflakes and listens to the sound of the tide – not because of lacking the experience of *observing* the new object, but because he or she does not have a *valuable experience* of these phenomena. Husserl sees no difference in the questions ‘What does it mean that the sky is blue?’ and ‘What is the significance of the sky being blue?’ For Mamardashvili, for all its semantic

fuzziness, it is the second type of question that enables the constitution and subsequent understanding of a phenomenon. As a phenomenological being, the human witnesses the surprising connection between questions about the meaning of existence (whose limit is the fundamental metaphysical question ‘Why does everything that exists exist?’) and questions of significance. When I understand what snow is and why it is important to me, I *extract experience* from its existence. But to do this, I must first be able to ask why it should exist at all, why it should be valuable. The distinctive nature of Mamardashvili’s phenomenology is in its assertion of the axiological element in the constitution of reality. Reality can appear meaningful to me under the condition that I structure my experience through values, chiefly through the value of metaphysical questioning about the ultimate meaning of existence.

As an important instrument of Mamardashvilian phenomenology, the idea of the ‘extraction of meaning’ is decidedly original. It implies a non-recurring holistic grasp of meaning which is not given by any subsequent succession of steps. This grasp is unlike the moment of clarity at the end of reading a book or watching a film. No quantity of fact, however complete, can amount to sense, if only because the set of facts is never complete, while meaning cannot be reduced to the exhaustiveness of available facts – though it can be extracted from a single fact, if grasped correctly. Nor is meaning reducible to the linear succession of facts. To catch sight of meaning, what we need is not to follow the sequence but to apprehend its totality. Meaning is ‘perpendicular’ to the line of facts. A musician performs a concerto not as a sequence of notes but as a unity held whole in the imagination. Meaning exceeds facts and sequential arrangements; it is not sequential but synchronous – a sudden grasp of the whole when we see *through* the entire sequence instead of following it point by point.

Let us imagine, for example, that we are shown a movie or given a story to read, so that the movie or the story consist of five unconnected scenes – for instance, a murder, a meeting between lovers, a robbery, followed by some terrorists hijacking an airplane and, in conclusion, the discovery of a buried treasure. *No continuity of characters is there to give this any further coherence.* The result will confuse us and we would be right to say that these five scenes could only inhabit a single text either by pure accident or because of the author’s oversight, or perhaps because of someone’s joke in borrowing these episodes from other works and arranging them in a kind of collage. Here we are dealing with a case where there is no connection in the narrative, or if there is, it is so artificial that it is staring us in the face.

Now consider another case. For example, someone suggests that we watch a film or read a story where *a single lead character* performs a variety of actions

in a sequence of five scenes. For example, in the first scene he declares his love to his girlfriend, in the second he finds out that a murder has been committed, in the third he emerges victorious from a nocturnal fight with a bunch of robbers, in the fourth he meets an old friend, and in the fifth he returns home and goes to bed. What would we say when confronted with such a narrative? Most likely, that we have not understood anything. Our perplexity will be due to the fact that a *meaningful* coherence of the plot has not been observed, and it is the absence or presence of meaning that enables us to say that we either understand something or do not. These examples bring us to the obvious conclusion that not every relationship *is a meaningful one*. In other words, the presence of a system of connections (syntax) does not by itself entail *meaning* (semantics).

The life of a single person, as well as the life of humanity and the history of the universe, are all represented by a sequence of such scenes, where connection is a given but meaning is not. When we inquire into the meaning of life, it is this elusive meaning that we are after. But the logical connection established between episodes in a life cannot help in this search. Asking about a life's meaning, we ask about the idea expressed, realized and manifested through it. This is a kind of 'moral' or idea that an author keeps in mind, when composing a work of literature that will express it tacitly, but never explicitly. When we suddenly grasp this idea, we understand the book as a whole. But if this idea eludes us, the scenes we read will remain unintelligible, each of them perhaps fascinating, but more or less equal to a wooden beam – or even to a beautiful house – devoid of significance.

Now that we have understood the two aspects of phenomena in Mamardashvili's understanding – namely, the intimacy of experience and its correlation with an idea – what remains to be understood is exactly how this occurs. Can we arbitrarily invoke such states in ourselves? Is it possible to discover that integral meaning-formation within which any episode, any perception might come to fruition? Mamardashvili suggests that we cannot generate, control, or direct these states in any way. We can make a great effort to enable their emergence, but we cannot guarantee anything about them. We can only strive for success. Therefore, Mamardashvili often speaks of phenomena as events, having in mind their spontaneous and random occurrence. An event-phenomenon is something that can only happen to me, manifest itself to me. We can say that Mamardashvili creates a kind of *phenomenology of the event*. After all, experience is an event *par excellence*, something that happens to us and not something that we ourselves produce at will. Experience, as a rule, is lived as a superfluous spontaneity, as something introduced and not deduced. It is, in Kantian terms, a synthetic phenomenon in which a certain knowledge is adduced, but not an analytical phenomenon in which knowledge is deduced.

In this connection, when speaking about a phenomenon, Mamardashvili sometimes uses the term ‘epiphany’ (for example, in his *Cartesian Meditations*). An epiphany is precisely the special phenomenon that is given in light of axiological meaning. It is not a mere record of the phenomena around me as disjointed noises and blots of color – but an integral gestalt captured in its intimate importance to the observer. An epiphany is a phenomenon of ‘revelation of the truth or reality in a transparent sensitive body, which is also immediate understanding’ or ‘some isolated privileged phenomenon of the world’.<sup>15</sup> This is very similar to what not only Husserl but also Heidegger might have said about a phenomenon (consider the self-disclosure of being in *Aletheia*). The difference that Mamardashvili distinguishes and emphasizes is the moment of random encounter with the phenomenon in question. In epiphany, the manifestation of a phenomenon is an event and, in that sense, completely independent of the will of the subject; it is what happens to her or him as a direct participant but not as an agent. Mamardashvili’s invocation of the concept of an event is not incidental, since he places a real emphasis on event understood as co-operation, co-participation and, in effect, co-existence.

In this matter, Mamardashvili plays with the concept of phenomenological intentionality, claiming that an event is neither an object in itself nor a subject, but something *in-between* the two. Unlike Husserl, who interprets intentionality as a non-anthropomorphic mechanism, Mamardashvili interprets an event as an existential act, something in the proper sense human – as an encounter, and a chance encounter at that. As a result of such an encounter, which Mamardashvili sometimes calls an ‘inadvertent joy’, we can extract meaning as it is extracted from a work of art. This extraction of meaning, or ‘precipitation’, is the crystallization of meaning or its grasping in a transverse manner. Mamardashvili prefers to interpret the phenomenological *epoché* as a reduction to an event – that is, as a refusal to think of anything in terms of objectivity and causality (a succession of episodes or facts). What is introduced instead is ‘event phenomenology’, in which the event is constituted along the lines of our innermost perceptions, our personal history of meaning in light of the totality of our lived experience. This constitution can occur quite spontaneously, as a random encounter. But in the moment when it occurs, I will be able to understand at once what is happening, what it means, the true nature of the situation I am in, what meaningful whole this particular event is a part of, etc.

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15 Merab Mamardashvili, *Cartesian Meditations* [Картезианские размышления] (Moscow: Mamardashvili Foundation, 2019), 138.

We can see that the constituting of a phenomenon involves three aspects. First among these is the existence of a personal experience connected with the perceived reality; second, the correlation of this personal experience with an idea that manifests itself in this experience; and third, the motif of a random event that, spark-like, illuminates the meaning as a whole. All three components taken together allow us occasionally to understand the significance of what we ordinarily see as but a series of meaningless, albeit connected, episodes – suddenly realizing the authentic situation, ‘guessing’ that it would have been absolutely impossible to synthesize meaning from a sequence of events of arbitrary duration. These three aspects of the constitution of the event are what permits the extraction of meaning. This means going through the usual sequence of events, ‘cutting a corner’ and breaking through directly to the meaning. Such an accident is our only chance at grasping meaning, as this cannot be done naturally, in the ordinary course of things. The current of ordinary occurrence must break off, without an explanation, unless we question it intensely. There is nothing in the succession of images and episodes flickering along this current that might by itself convey meaning. Mamardashvili’s phenomenology of the event might better yet be called a phenomenology of luck and hope, but also a phenomenology of effort, since, without the work of attention and contemplation, we would not attain the meaning that we seek.

## Existentialism

In familiarizing oneself with Mamardashvili's legacy, it is hard not to notice the influence of the existentialist school on his philosophical constructions. In many ways, Mamardashvili's views are in sympathy with French existentialism, especially with the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, but there are also echoes of the work of Karl Jaspers and, to a lesser extent, Martin Heidegger. Mamardashvili's existentialism can be considered at the level of style: his work is not characterized by anything like a severe academic tone or a systematic and categorical structural manner in the presentation of his ideas. His reasoning is fluid and metaphorical rather than analytical, and marked by respectful attention to literary form. For Mamardashvili, as for many existential philosophers, expressive means played an important role in the transmission of ideas. But are there any similarities, beyond style, that might link Mamardashvili's philosophy with existentialism?

Many texts devoted to Mamardashvili's work suggest that he understood philosophy as a deeply personal project. Philosophical thought is not transmitted as information but must always involve the lived experience of understanding. It is this thesis above all else that represents the existentialist motif in Mamardashvili. A person has but him- or herself to rely on, not only in his or her free activity, but also in bestowing meaning and in understanding, as suggested by Sartre among others. For Mamardashvili, *Existenz* is any conscious act of responsibility.

*Existenz* is what you have to do in the here-and-now. It prohibits postponing things for tomorrow or shifting responsibility onto the shoulders of another, to those of a neighbor, the nation, the state, or society. You must do it yourself.<sup>1</sup>

This concerns, above all, the philosophical work itself. In many of his lectures, he repeats: the philosophical theories of the past and present are open-ended reflections, invitations to a dialogue open to like-minded independent thinkers. The history of philosophy is, then, an ongoing history of which we are participants. The history of thought is fundamentally incomplete. Even if

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<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path*, I, 25.

a philosophical theory had been developed and all the arguments had been made, each individual act understanding such a theory would be a freestanding, new event. When turning to the history of philosophy, we can experiment with its results; what we cannot do, on the other hand, is appropriate the results of someone else's understanding. You can only develop your own, but, in order to achieve this, you have to think for yourself and speak on your own behalf.

Mamardashvili repeatedly highlighted that Socrates' great discovery was of such knowledge that cannot be assimilated as information. It is this knowledge that he considered properly philosophical – the kind of knowledge that always appears as actual understanding, not in the reproduction of what was previously understood. Any philosophical statement can mean a great deal or nothing at all, depending on whether the person has a personal history of thinking about this statement. In this sense, philosophical propositions are more like triggers than like units and volumes of information. 'For only by thinking ... and by practicing the ability to pose questions and make distinctions independently, can a person discover philosophy.'<sup>2</sup> Philosophy is not 'attained knowledge', nor is it acquired in the course of learning skills or mastering a profession. Philosophy is a phenomenological act of understanding itself, which by definition cannot be transferred to another. And, of course, this is why Mamardashvili needed to speak exactly as he did, taking lengthy and strange detours in search of the right approach to an idea – the path by which he could arrive at it, and bring someone else along. Philosophical terms or concepts are, then, but markers that we use to mark out the path of our thoughts, in order to preserve the memory of the journey.

Mamardashvili's existentialism resides in his conviction of the philosopher's personal involvement in his or her work. Just like Heidegger, who, in one way or another, experienced the influence of existentialism, Mamardashvili divides metaphysics between the history of philosophical doctrines (which can be narrated) and philosophical reasoning, which must be performed autonomously. Understanding is attained only by those who have accustomed themselves to thinking philosophically. Philosophical constructions do not belong to positive knowledge; they do not convey meaning well in subject-object formulations. In contrast with pure information, where anyone who reads the inscription 'To turn on the kettle, press the red button' will understand what had been understood by the writer of the instruction, it is possible to read the phrase 'I think, therefore I exist' countless times without ever understanding it – unless the reader perform the famous Cartesian experiment anew. Philosophic work

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<sup>2</sup> Mamardashvili, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 356.

requires independent thinking, so that meaning might be revealed in the process, suddenly, like a flash of lightning. When this occurs, it is because philosophical judgments do not tell us anything about situations or objects of our experience – they do not indicate things and their relations. They do not indicate anything external at all. They are, rather, like invocations that invite us to contemplate them. “The subject of philosophy is philosophy itself.”<sup>3</sup>

For Mamardashvili, an idea is a cognitive act in a Cartesian sense. The self examines itself in its reality through an act of thought, but this act also attains reality through being contemplated by a certain self. Moreover, live philosophical reasoning can be inconsistent and haphazard, just like speech, which can be dislocated and ‘unprofessional’. It is no accident that, like other proponents of existentialism – above all, like Heidegger – Mamardashvili adheres to a largely private, idiosyncratic language of philosophical reasoning. This is connected with the fact that professionalized academic philosophy has largely lost touch with the original Greek meanings of early philosophy. The task of philosophical language, however, is by no means limited to a doxographic reconstruction of original concepts. Ancient thought, free from the strictures of complex philosophical terms that would appear later, gave a significant example of how one could employ the simplest words to express one’s best understanding. Its merit is in that it learned to think philosophically in everyday language, perfectly continuous with the language of everyday life. This language allowed one to see more clearly and honestly where immediate understanding ended and the clichés of language came into effect, the text being tailored according to the laws of professionalized usage.

Later, as philosophical thought became more complex and developed, its language became correspondingly staler and more hermetic, losing its connection to the source. Terms of art were consolidated, simplifying the work of philosophers who no longer had to find their words anew to express their thoughts. The downside of this transformation lay in the fact that philosophical terms of art became less transparent. The most trivial of terms in the professionalized vocabulary of the philosopher – ‘ideas’, ‘being’, ‘substance’ – are not always clear to a layperson or even to a philosopher-in-training, whose understanding may come down to being able to use them in the right context. Ultimately, philosophy lost the quality of ‘human self-construction’,<sup>4</sup> its existential substance. Mamardashvili was intent on developing a language of

3 Merab Mamardashvili, ‘How I Understand Philosophy’ [‘Как я понимаю философию’], *Vestnik Vysshey Shkoly*, 2, 1989, 84.

4 Merab Mamardashvili, ‘To Be a Philosopher Is a Destiny’ [‘Быть философом – это судьба’], *Filosofskaya i sotsiologicheskaya mys’l’* (Kyiv, Ukraine), 2, 1989, 34.



his own, through which he sought to communicate his acts of immediate, personal understanding.

The existential origins of Mamardashvili's thought include the idea of personal involvement in philosophic reasoning – the notion of philosophy as a way of life. 'The path to philosophy', he wrote, 'runs through our own trials, through which we gain irreplaceable, unique experience'.<sup>5</sup> When speaking of 'trials', Mamardashvili is awake to the history of human suffering. Axiological discomfort – suffering and the concomitant sense of disharmony, injustice, absurdity, conflict – can bring us face-to-face with the most philosophical of all intuitions, namely, the understanding that the existing world is not identical with all there is. Perhaps there is another world, something ideal that may correspond with reality, or not. It is due to suffering that a person withdraws from the world, objectifies it, not as a scientist but as an ethical thinker. He or she asks 'why', referring to the ethical state of affairs in which the world dwells, and to the values of this world. Yet having posed such a question, a person may notice that she or he has a way of posing it as a question of perplexity, outrage, resentment or horror. This question is asked from some other axiological dimension, in which a person has imperceptibly settled and rooted herself. As a result of this disposition, a person can, as Mamardashvili puts it, 'go through a process of sedimentation' and crystallize, 'precipitate' some meaning. At the heart of this awareness, which is not innate but can emerge in a person, is the intuition of a gap between what is and what could or should be. It is, moreover, 'the way things are' which is intuited to be imperfect. This is incomprehensible and unfair. In the world we live in, everything is not as it should be.

Mamardashvili interprets what in phenomenology is usually called a 'naturalistic' or 'natural' setting of consciousness in an ethical sense. If the natural setting within ontology might be expressed as 'in the real world, everything *is* as I see it', then the natural setting within ethics would be expressible as 'everything that is, should be just as it is'. Both of these states are characterized by a banalization of reality and an absence of wonder. But just as knowledge of the world begins with wonder and shifts away from the natural attitude to the phenomenological one, so moral maturation begins with wonder and with rejection of the injustice of the world as given. If we take the world as it is and nothing in it bothers us, this can only speak of our ethical immaturity. Mamardashvili calls natural acceptance of the world (the identification of *how it is* with *how it should be*) a fatal error of thought.<sup>6</sup> But one can only feel this

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5 Mamardashvili, 'How I Understand Philosophy', 82.

6 Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 129.

unnaturalness in a personal sense: it is, strictly speaking, not a thought, being unlike an axiom or a logical conclusion. It is a personal experience and, moreover, one which forces us to temporarily hate this world.

Here Mamardashvili not only shows himself to be an existentialist philosopher, but above all a Russian thinker in the tradition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, for whom the most important human existential is suffering. Experience has nothing to do with long years of theoretical training in the technique of conducting philosophical disputes. According to Mamardashvili, a person can arrive at a philosophical perspective even if she or he is unaware of what philosophy is or that their dismay is philosophical in nature. The metaphysical question of first causes owes its origin to a special state of perplexity, which can only stem from essentially personal moral tribulations. Mamardashvili is credited with an idea he expressed in his lectures, according to which Plato was made a philosopher by the unjust execution of his mentor, Socrates. The natural and naïve condition of a person is that of unconditional acceptance of the world as is, but if this state of complacency is disrupted by a moral blow, an unnatural belief can be awakened – a belief that somewhere there must be another world akin to the Platonic ‘world of ideas’. This usually takes the form of an ethical discovery – we realize the value of goodness and justice, but also that these are never attained in the world we happen to inhabit. It is in a moment of despair that we may realize that there is another world, from which we draw our knowledge (clear as the light of the sun) of these values.

It is not vexation and horror alone that can turn us into philosophers. Another key existential concept for philosophical reasoning is an uneasy conscience. In his lectures, Mamardashvili often mentions the famous Socratic Daimon, the voice of conscience, which, not without reason, is also important to Socrates himself. One begins to philosophize under conditions of complex moral situations and of disenchantment always already induced by comparison of what is with what should be. The motif of the ‘consolation of philosophy’ is deeper than it may seem at first. Philosophy is nearly always a consolation, insofar as we need it precisely in those times when we need to be consoled. An unhappy person may notice the discrepancy between the existing order and the desired one, whereas a happy person has no need of such a dual perspective. He is happy with everything and has no need for greater understanding.

On the other hand, the agony of conscience, dislocation, indecision, uncertainty and the incompleteness of the world, confusion and the eternally unanswered questions ‘What does it all mean?’ and ‘Why is this happening to the world and to me?’ are the most fertile grounds for philosophical reasoning. These questions indicate that the person, as Mamardashvili said, is ‘preparing for a second birth’, is ‘pregnant with himself’. The existentialist

subtext of Mamardashvili's philosophy is very forceful here, insofar as it concerns encountering a void from which the person turns towards the world as to something incomprehensible and alien. Departing from the classical existentialist position, Mamardashvili believes that a person cannot remain in the void of absurdity.

On the contrary, this emptiness is the condition of the possibility of existing. It is here that a vista of wide metaphysical expanses can open up, together with the path towards contemplation of the 'eternal'. In this area of his philosophy, Mamardashvili thinks like a classical pre-existential philosopher, a Platonist or a Neoplatonist. Where there is an opportunity to renounce the transitory, there is also a chance to come into contact with the mode of the eternal, which means to understand something, because we understand – Mamardashvili maintained, adhering to the classical tradition – by connecting to the ideal, the eternal and the abstract. Nothing can be understood from within the continuum of piecemeal events and facts. Understanding never takes place from the perspective of particular facts, physical objects and disparate events, for each experience is fundamentally incomplete and teaches us nothing. Nothing can be learned from experience.

In this matter, Mamardashvili appears to be a classic follower of the new European paradigm of rationalism, which eventually gave rise to transcendental philosophy. We understand only from the viewpoint of eternity, but it is not an easy thing to access. In contrast with European existentialism, Mamardashvili thinks of the alienation from the world of existence, the state of 'perplexity' and the dissolution of ties between the self and the world as a positive experience. If Sartre or Camus tend to sympathize with a person left alone with their angst and alienation, Mamardashvili does not see any great tragedy here but interprets this condition as the beginning of awareness and thought.

For Mamardashvili, philosophy is a personal endeavor, discovered and understood by a person. In this sense, Mamardashvili's work can be viewed through an existentialist prism. But, in contrast with the best-known varieties of European existentialism, such as Sartre's, for Mamardashvili a human being gains access to the metaphysical dimension of existence through suffering and alienation, while Sartre's human is doomed to remain alone. In this sense, Mamardashvili's existentialism can be seen as having a greater affinity with Karl Jaspers's religious existentialism. However, Mamardashvili refrains from engaging in direct conversation about faith and religion. Accounting for the ambiguity of his affinity with existentialism, some thinkers call him 'an

existential philosopher who does not accept existentialism<sup>7</sup> – and yet, we might add, acts as an existentialist nevertheless.

Mamardashvili's own authorial idiosyncrasy in his existentialist sources is reflected in his development of a special theme of the 'conscious life'. By *existing* Mamardashvili understood not so much the simple presence of a person in the world as her or his 'conscious life'. It is not just human existence lost in its inexplicability, but a vital one, too. Only the living exist in this particular sense, but their ability to be alive is not given by default. According to Mamardashvili's existential position, it is reflection that makes us truly alive. This motif is not that close to European existentialism, nor is it to the Philosophy of Life, where it was customary to cautiously review the entire history of the deification of reason. By the time existentialism emerged, that standing of reason in Western philosophy had already been compromised, and Cartesian rationalism and Hegelian panlogism were also being questioned. Even if we 'bracket', or suspend, the outright irrationalism derived from the works of Friedrich Nietzsche or Henri Bergson, existentialism will still remain far from anything like reverence for reason and rational practices. *To exist* signifies to exist against the grain of rationality – for *existence* is immeasurably broader than any rational attempt to supply it with meaning; it is a quality of something beyond understanding, which thereby dooms conceptual thinking always to lag behind the actuality.

Mamardashvili speaks of thought and conscious life with profound respect. 'To live is to think', he says, and it seems that he is ready to substantially dispute the existentialist stance on this issue. This readiness is inflected by what Mamardashvili means by the concepts of awareness and thought. Consciousness in Mamardashvili is not understood in the narrow technical sense of the rational practice of logical reasoning. This is not what Kant would call understanding (*Verstand*), the capacity for making judgments. And it is not even quite what appears in Kant in the form of reason (*Vernunft*) – a collection of purposeful regulatory ideas that direct the work of the mind. It is a very particular state, which in fact also avoids being grasped in terms of *Existenz* by existentialists. It is not simply reason, but *awareness*, though not in the phenomenological sense of grasping a phenomenon.

Instead, it is characterized by a search for meaning. It is a special state of mind and thought when, in the face of isolated events flung at us by fate like randomly drawn cards, we are disposed to search for the meaning behind it

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7 E. Yu. Solovyov, 'The Existential Soteriology of Merab Mamardashvili' [Э. Ю. Соловьёв, 'Экзистенциальная сотериология Мераба Мамардашвили'], *Istoriko-filosofskiy yezhegodnik*, 1998–2000, 398.

all. In fact, we are talking about *meaningful existence*. But this is how *Existenz* is understood in existentialism: as a *conscious existence*. When Mamardashvili speaks of awareness, he actually means active, awakened, living comprehension. To be aware means to cast one's existence into doubt every minute, for the logic of the world is hidden from us. Perplexity about the world and being honest with ourselves about being thus perplexed is what Mamardashvili understands by *Existenz*, in the sense of *Existenz* of thought, or conscious life. His existential formula is this: to live is to be conscious, aware of what is happening to you, and to endeavor to understand your genuine situation. In his existentialism, Mamardashvili is closest to Pascal with his metaphor of the 'thinking reed'. The world can destroy me, but it can do nothing with my understanding, which always exceeds any senseless destructive power. If a person understands his or her authentic situation, he or she thereby acquires truly supernatural powers.

Philosophical inquiry, then, consists not only in the systematization of disparate impressions, but also in the 'local presence of the global'. Thinking is the form in which the life of consciousness is realized as it 'occurs on an existential path'. In this connection, the entire history of our real experiences is not an abstraction, although it does strive to assume a form in theory. In order to persist in being, one must inhabit the state of intensive thinking. But the procedures of awareness are not a given, nor can we hope to establish awareness once and for all, and be certain that it will never leave us. These states are extemporaneous. A philosophical act in Mamardashvili's understanding is an event – a 'moment of consciousness', 'a certain spark of consciousness'. By its very nature, the act of understanding is extemporaneous, it arises suddenly and subordinates us to itself: we can no longer fail to understand, we cannot revoke our understanding. In terms of his understanding of the concept of the 'event' Mamardashvili thinks in the spirit of a number of French authors (Deleuze, Badiou or Derrida). An event is extemporaneous and incidental, not part of a deterministic chain. It is not predefined, and yet it is primary in possessing a self-sufficient nature, since the event refers only to itself, is self-sufficient and shapes its own reality.

Mamardashvili builds a kind of 'philosophy of existential event', holding the view that a person thinks in such events. In his *Lectures on Proust* (a series of lectures of 1984–1985) Mamardashvili speaks of conscious life as a sum of existential events. Each of these events is the product of a person's mental effort. His understanding of consciousness as a creative effort preserves, on the one hand, the existential approach of the European philosophical tradition, and, on the other hand, opposes the traditional existentialism by a novel approach, suggesting that the individual does not just create himself as a cultural and

historical subject, but can also connect to a system of eternal truths. In Sartre's existentialism, the idea of such a connection had been rejected as overly theological, metaphysical, too much in the spirit of traditional Platonism. In French existentialism, a person does not have any privileged access to the sacred dimensions of existence, simply because they do not exist, or if they do, they are indifferent to humankind. Humanity is not involved in any universal plan with special epochal meanings reserved for it; the world has no need for expressing itself with the aid of humanity. It simply exists and has no idea what to do with that fact. For Mamardashvili, on the contrary, the person is connected to the dimension of meaning that certainly exists, though it is inexpressible. According to Mamardashvili, a person is a node of this meaningful underside of existence; his or her thinking, feelings, morality and *Existenz* are not 'of this world' but 'of that other one'.

Whereas, in Sartre and Camus, the human is not created by God, in Mamardashvili the human is not created by nature and evolution. Just as in French existentialism, humanity is its own creation. Mamardashvili says that the human must 'be fulfilled as a human being' and as 'a creature whose emergence is being continuously renewed'.<sup>8</sup> Mamardashvili does not assert the uncreated origin of man by God, preferring not to discuss such things directly, considering silence in Wittgenstein's spirit to be pertinent in this regard. Yet the absence of a natural-evolutionary origin of the human and the human's connection to the higher order of ideas prompt us to think about the special nature of the human. Mamardashvili himself resorts to the Biblical metaphor of the human being as God's image and likeness, but interprets this phrase symbolically, as referring to the 'vertical' nature of the human.

For Mamardashvili, thinking as such is rooted in supernatural regions. In its mysterious origin, humanity belongs to the logic of the metaphysical. It is not just a cultural or symbolic phenomenon, but a 'metaphysical' one. The proof of this thesis is the simple and obvious fact that, despite its fragile physicality and effective existence as a clot of matter, a person can know the ideal and understand absolute meanings. Being born and dying as a body, a person understands the laws of mathematics and logic, and has the capacity to formulate philosophical ideas. This ability, of course, is only potentiated in people – otherwise most of us would not be afraid of death. What amazes Mamardashvili most of all is that people who are afraid of death do not think about the fact that they are no longer fully alive, because to live as a person means to live as

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8 Merab Mamardashvili, *Philosophy Is Thinking Aloud. Consciousness and Civilization* [Философия – это мышление вслух. Сознание и цивилизация] (Moscow: Mamardashvili Foundation, 2011), 34.

a conscious being. One can reproduce oneself as a biological unit but it is only human consciousness that lives in the true sense of the word. That is why it is so important ‘not to sleep, but to be wakeful’:

We are speaking about the time of labor, the sign of which is a second, a fraction of a second; in other words, the space of truth can only be expanded by labor, and by itself it is an instant. And if you were to miss it ... everything would be chaos and decay, nothing would be repeated, and the world itself would fall into oblivion. Into the endless repetition of hell. This would be your mediocre, unfulfilled vicious state, which would endlessly repeat itself, and you yourself would never extract any experience from it, not least because you let that moment pass you by – for you did not dwell in labor. Let us conventionally call this the labor of life which is designated by a sign of lightning.<sup>9</sup>

We can see that by *Existenz* Mamardashvili means active understanding, or the life of consciousness.

In this sense, the Russian language can lead us astray, since *Existenz* can signify not only *existence* (or *existentsiya*, in Russian) but also *being* (*suschestvovaniye*). On the other hand, the Russian may supply the key to understanding some of Mamardashvili’s chosen metaphors. In Russian, there is an expression ‘I do not live but exist only’, implying that a person is physically alive, but spiritually and mentally dead. He is simply present in existence, as if serving a military duty, but does not feel or think, and behaves in the world more or less like a mechanical doll. Can we say that he is alive? Hardly. Life does not amount to bodily movements or the succession of everyday occurrences, but to the history of our understanding. Our age is calculated not in the years of existence but by the number of acts of intensive thinking. Mamardashvili liked to invoke Descartes, who famously said that in his entire life he thought for no more than a few hours. It is the sum of such acts of understanding that Mamardashvili calls life. In this sense, the French philosophical concept of existence may come into conflict with the opposition of life and existence that exists in the Russian language.

Mamardashvili’s idea of life echoes the existentialist motif of authenticity and inauthenticity. Existential philosophers view activity in general as inauthentic, stereotyped, repetitive, like an automatic gesture. In Sartre it is the opposite of freedom, in adherence to the opinions of the crowd (‘the Other’);

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<sup>9</sup> Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path*, I, 33.

in Heidegger it is represented by *das Man*. A socially normalized, standardized existence manifesting itself not only in the actions, behavioral norms, values and traditions that we adhere to, but also in everyday speech and thinking patterns, when we speak according to convention and think as we are expected to. This is the certain minimal stereotype of human existence, stable, functional and resilient, yet dead. Inauthentic being in existentialism is self-reproduction according to a pattern imposed by others: like everyone else, I am socialized according to the norms of my society. But this is also a state of thoughtlessness, of non-involvement. This is a state in which we spend most of our time thinking carelessly. By and large, this is our acritical stance. Unfortunately, clichéd appeals to ‘critical thinking’, like other clichés, can be emptied of meaning by frequent and reflexive use. Everything that is subject to social prescriptions has this capacity to become a dead and empty imitation. Life manifests not in compliance but in disorder, not in adherence to doctrine but in uncertainty and doubt of one’s convictions, and in a critical disposition expressed in indecision and hesitation before making a judgment.

As a result, Mamardashvili introduces a certain duality into human existence. There are two modes, or ‘registers’, of life, in one of which we exist authentically, while in the other our existence has the form of imitation. The first is maintained by the natural attitude of consciousness and the naivety of ethical sense. On this level, we largely take everything at face value. This is our everyday stereotyped existence guided by automated social norms. At this level, you do not just do what everyone else is doing, but also think what everyone else is thinking. This is Sartre’s so-called inauthentic being and Heidegger’s *das Man*. Mamardashvili considers this mode a pseudo-existence, in which a person is effectively dead. The other register of life is maintained by a metaphysical perspective, which involves the acute awareness of not comprehending what we see. The world is not accepted by default – on the contrary, it is bewildering and seems to be ‘an alien planet’ yet to be mastered. In this mode, we ‘come to the world from afar’, from other settings, the setting of what ought to be; although their features are absent from the world as given to us, we make sense of it based on those settings and features. This mode has an intermittent structure. Its intermittency means that we can only access it from time to time, through conscious effort, but must inevitably fall out of it. This mode is expressed as enabling our veridical states, while in the other mode these veridical states tend to dissipate.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, we are always dual beings: half

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10 Ibid., 407.



sprouted in real, conscious life, and half in 'what conceals this conscious life from us'.<sup>11</sup>

The hidden dimension of life is attested by glimpses, signs and intimations. Mamardashvili appears to suggest a phenomenology of understanding familiar to practically every person. Everyone in life experiences, to a greater or lesser degree, a state of insight, when we intensely and vividly comprehend something original. This feeling is a sign indicating that we must 'dig here'. This is the state that Socrates sometimes vainly tried to evoke in his interlocutors by asking at length what is beautiful, just or true. To Mamardashvili, our thinking holds our only chance of grasping the true meaning, but we need effort, too, if we are not to let go of this chance. Each human being is situated in both dimensions, albeit in different proportions. We need to possess an unrelenting intuition in order to separate the imitation from authentic life. Shifting from one register to another was termed by Mamardashvili as 'intermittencies', and the self itself, 'the intermittent self'. All our life, in this light, consists of continuous shifting from the mode of actual understanding (and the states of this mode are rare) to the mode in which consciousness is effectively 'switched off', but practical efficiency is maintained. When no breakthrough occurs in the dimension of authentic life for a long time, we risk becoming the property of *das Man* and being assigned the logic of 'scattering and disintegration'.

Death does not come after life – it participates in life itself. In our mental life, there are always dead wastes or dead by-products of this very life. A person is often faced with the fact that these dead wastes occupy the entire space of life, leaving no room for a vivid feeling, for a living thought, for an authentic life.<sup>12</sup>

Without special effort, we all fall, as if by default, into this 'inanimate' mode, into the sphere of natural settings. To extricate oneself from this mode, one needs existential effort, because it is not completely natural to be alive (and fully human).

When explaining his existentialist version of the authentic and inauthentic, Mamardashvili uses the metaphor of sleep and wakefulness. 'Sleep' means not being aware that we are performing pre-programmed actions, speaking in cliché, thinking by habit. In this state, our thinking is associative and predictable. Language, culture, traditions, habits, fragments of phrases and opinions that

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 574.

<sup>12</sup> Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path*, II, 14.

have settled in our subconscious take the place of thinking: 'What we call reality most often consists of the representations, images and states that allow us to continue sleeping. In this case, "sleeping" means not knowing and not seeing reality, and in this sense, reality has the structure of a dream.'<sup>13</sup> The natural mode is, then, also the mode of hibernation. This does not mean that we are not active in this state. On the contrary, in this state we are much more efficient than in the state when we have fallen out of natural understanding. This state is likely to correspond to Socrates' famous habit of freezing in one pose and 'doing nothing' while deep in thought. On the contrary, in the natural state, we are usually very active, but our productivity is not associated with understanding. In such states, a person is not ready to interrogate himself or the world. Everything seems self-explanatory to him; life runs its habitual path. It is only in certain privileged moments that we suddenly 'switch on' and are sufficiently exposed to meanings to notice that something is not right with the world.

States in which the obvious becomes non-obvious are similar to what existentialism calls 'borderline' states. Mamardashvili here uses the term 'engagement', in a sense somewhat different from that of 'borderline state'. This is not always extreme stress: fear, horror, panic, a threat to life or welfare. This may be a state of extreme commitment, but in any case, it must include risk. The risk of finding out something undesirable, something that we would rather avoid. Effectively, a person has to risk *herself* – for example, risk realizing something about herself that will terrify her, but if she does not do this, she will not discover anything at all. In one of Mamardashvili's own examples, a certain master may venture down the back stairs to read what his servants scribble about him on the walls.<sup>14</sup> Or (this is now my own example) we will never discover the truth about our abilities unless we ask impartial people to evaluate our novel, poetry, scientific theory, or musical composition. One needs to take risks if one wants to discover one's own true state of affairs. 'You cannot find out anything if you are not engaged.'<sup>15</sup>

Engagement assumes that one deals with Ibsen's famous question: 'What did God want to express through me?' and takes the issue of one's own mission seriously. But this question begins with an honest clarification of 'one's true position' in the world, which can lead to the discovery of uncomfortable truths. A state of affairs may be revealed in which someone believes himself to be the savior of the human race but refuses to support people close to him or considers himself to be a future activist reformer but cannot cook his own breakfast.

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13 Ibid., 57.

14 Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path*, 1, 24.

15 Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path*, 11, 39.

Much of what Mamardashvili says about this is very mundane. He asserts that every time we are ready to speak honestly about ourselves and to hear others' opinions of ourselves, we are also absolutely sincere – and alive. But as a rule, a person builds his life so that this raw encounter with life could be avoided.

Following existentialist philosophers in affirming that you cannot remain in a borderline state all your life, Mamardashvili says that engagement is a moment that stands out. Only sages, hermits and some professional philosophers can extend this state across a lifetime. For ordinary people, these states are irregular moments at best. But being absent from this authentic mode of life is always our loss: 'Lost time is that in which you could have lived but didn't; you were given a sign, but you missed it.'<sup>16</sup> To prevent this from happening, we are given doubt and courage – the courage to doubt everything and to search for an answer. This is the existentially engaged dimension of thought that Mamardashvili called philosophy proper.

In conclusion, I wish to highlight another difference between Mamardashvili and traditional existentialism. He was not a pure existentialist philosopher like Sartre or Camus, because he did not insist on the tragic fate of a person who is cast into an obscure and alien world. In this matter, Mamardashvili maintained the optimism of classical philosophy – he believed that a person of reason can fully feel the happiness of possessing the meaning of existence. It is unlikely that this meaning could be expressed, yet the tragic question-claim concerning the meaning of existence is hereby 'resolved' in a Wittgensteinian manner – removed as irrelevant. Still, a person may be deigned with an inexpressible sense of meaning if only her attention is systematically occupied with thought and with questioning existence from an abstracted point of view. When we pose a question before the world, not from the point of view of its internal determinism ('Why do birds fly?', 'Why do seasons change?', 'Why does snow melt?') but on a larger scale ('Why should there be a world in which birds fly, seasons change, and snow melts?'), these questions convey our thinking to the transcendent realm, where the world appears as a significant whole, a complete work, perhaps even a work of art. This is a work that has a final meaning – a moral, an idea or a plan. But it is this kind of optics that reveals the divine gaze, if only there is one. The logic of Creation and the perspective of the Creator are in seeing the world at a distance and in creating it, also at a distance. This position is not the same as our immersion in the historic drama of the world, where everyone plays a role without knowing the plot of the whole play.

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16 Ibid., 88.

In virtue of this motif, Mamardashvili's thought is noticeably different from that of classical existentialism, in which the theme of God-abandonment resounds very forcefully. Mamardashvili is not ready to say anything about the existence or absence of a God, but nevertheless draws a picture of what the divine perspective would look like. In fact, it is this perspective that he calls, properly, philosophical. This fact has given rise to a number of scholars asserting that in his philosophy, or, if you like, in his version of existential philosophy, Mamardashvili developed a 'philosophy of life', an 'existential soteriology', understood as the maintenance of constant mental effort for the sake of the salvation of the soul. 'Philosophy is a special mental practice that helps us better understand what philosophers might have meant when they seriously discussed the immortality of the soul.'<sup>17</sup>

Mamardashvili's thought does not fully adhere to the tragic idea of a human cast into the world that we encounter in most European existentialists. Instead, he prefers to remain in the depths of traditional Christian thought: as long as we understand, then we have hope and the world itself invites us towards understanding. This represents Mamardashvili's distinctive existentialism, and marks him as a distinctly Russian existentialist whose views combine the 'human, all too human' with the universal and the eternal. The latter categories do not simply inhere within the 'all too human', but can even be successfully cultivated. While traditional existentialism views a person as 'cast into being', Mamardashvili adduces that a person need not be humiliated by the absurdity and perplexity of existence. Not knowing how to answer the question 'Why do I exist?', a person need not fall into either dejection or protest. On the contrary, in asking questions about the meaning of existence, a person awakens to the eternal life of consciousness and to a living connection with the meaning of existence as proposed by Socrates and Plato – for, if there were none, we could not possibly learn it.

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<sup>17</sup> Solovyov, 398.

**PART 3**

*Philosophy of Consciousness*



## By the Name of Consciousness

Scholars of Mamardashvili's legacy are nearly unanimous in acknowledging the problem of human consciousness as the principal theme of his philosophy. Even his other philosophical studies, dedicated to other questions and authors (*Kantian Variations*, *Cartesian Meditations*, *Lectures on Proust*, etc.) are far from confining themselves to historic expositions. These studies are, in reality, essays on consciousness, its nature and the manner of its existing in the world.

Mamardashvili believed that the question of consciousness should precede all other questions of philosophy. Endeavors to understand consciousness are spurred by 'our desire to reach some threshold available to us now ... in search of the foundations of *our own* conscious existence'.<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili always held that the human capacity for philosophizing was related to the fact that humans were endowed with consciousness – that is, an originally metaphysical experience of being in the world. On the other hand, in his elaborated account, the effort of understanding 'what is consciousness' is prompted by two related reasons. First, understanding consciousness is a task consisting in the nearly-unachievable transcendence of the limits of consciousness itself. Second, to understand what consciousness *is*, one should, first and foremost, understand what consciousness *is not*.

During the twentieth century, consciousness became one of the favorite topics in philosophical studies. It was much discussed, and those who tried to explain consciousness sought to explain it in such a way that would suit not only philosophers representing the various schools and trends, but also scientists, as well as the popular audience. Some modern scientists and philosophers think of the problem of consciousness as the 'last unconquered fortress' on the way of the triumphant march of science. And yet, back in the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer called consciousness 'the rub of the Universe', meaning its persistence as an obscure 'blind spot' of science, resisting the trend of apparent progress in other areas of human knowledge. Schopenhauer's opinion can be assigned to the class of 'pessimist philosophy'. The latter can, in turn, be subdivided by degrees of skepticism, into moderate skeptics (who believe that the problem of consciousness is unlikely ever to be solved) and radical skeptics (who would maintain that the problem is

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<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili, Pyatigorsky, 23.

fundamentally unsolvable). While, in the radically pessimistic viewpoint, the fact that the problem of consciousness has not yet been solved is the natural outcome of its fundamental insolubility, the moderately pessimistic position consists in refraining from what is viewed as premature interpretations of experimental data (collected by neuroscientists, for example).

But there are also optimistic philosophers. They consider the 'secret' of consciousness to be but temporary, and expect to find, quite soon, a conclusive and irrefutable solution to the question of the structure of consciousness and the mechanism of the generation of thoughts. This position is bolstered by references to brilliant achievements in various areas of neurophysiology, from neurolinguistics to neuroengineering, which, indeed, cannot be disregarded. 'Optimists', too, can be either moderate or radical. The former believe that the impossibility of obtaining a conclusive account of the structure of consciousness does not, in itself, preclude the possibility of finding answers to partial questions, such as 'How does consciousness address certain specific tasks?' or 'Can we teach a computer to think?'. Radical optimists, on the other hand, maintain that finding a conclusive, coherent solution to the problem of consciousness is not only possible but is not even as difficult as it appears to some philosophers.

What was, then, Mamardashvili's position in this respect? The best preamble to our answer might be supplied by Martin Heidegger's famous introduction to his lecture 'What is Metaphysics?':

The question awakens expectations of a discussion about metaphysics. Instead we will take up a particular metaphysical question. In this way it seems we will let ourselves be transposed directly into metaphysics. Only in this way will we provide metaphysics with the proper occasion to introduce itself.<sup>2</sup>

Heidegger means that, no matter how much he might wish to do so, he cannot explain 'what is metaphysics'. He cannot speak *of* metaphysics – all he can do is present it, or, in a way, perform it.

Mamardashvili shared this view of Heidegger's with respect to metaphysics, and, unsurprisingly, he maintains the same view with regard to consciousness. It makes no sense to him to speak *of* consciousness, since, in doing so, we must employ the same consciousness, for lack of any other cognitive

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'What Is Metaphysics?' in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed., trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 95–112.

instruments: *consciousness itself is the subject of consciousness*. Mamardashvili is against the method of analyzing consciousness as a certain object of study by proposing some mystical ‘meta-language’ that would not coincide with consciousness but would enable us to discuss such an objectified consciousness. For instance: there is consciousness and there is the language of neural correlates, from which consciousness originates. Or, there is consciousness, and there are C-fibers, which coincide with consciousness. Both of these methods are examples of reductive approaches, through which we speak of consciousness in a ‘language’ of physical processes and events. Reductionism did not suit Mamardashvili. As an alternative to such approaches, he proposed that *one should speak of consciousness in the language of consciousness itself*. If we cannot work with consciousness directly, we can still engage with the *understanding* of consciousness. According to Mamardashvili, tackling consciousness philosophically requires indirect experience, and the theory of consciousness should be essentially a meta-theory involving *meta-consciousness*.

What is critical here is that, in spite of its being a subject of great interest and continuous investigation, most approaches to consciousness – as Mamardashvili put it in *Symbol and Consciousness*, co-authored with Alexander Pyatigorsky – are aimed at ‘getting rid of consciousness’, or merely eliminating it. The master vector of manipulations of consciousness in the second half of the twentieth century was directed either towards reducing it to certain physiological assumptions or at reducing it to some other objective forms (such as social or linguistic relations). For Mamardashvili, all such ‘studies of consciousness’ have more or less the same objective, which is to dissolve consciousness into objective processes. These investigations, then, have the general character of a ‘struggle against consciousness’:

A special role is played here by a certain internal negative capability that manifests itself in a kind of ‘struggle against consciousness’. This struggle stems from the human ambition to strip consciousness of its spontaneity and natural self-activity.<sup>3</sup>

To consider the most common type of reductionism – that being the neurophysiological reductionism – it maintains that there is no consciousness at all, but only neurophysiological processes and neural structures. In this theory of identity, consciousness is equated with neural excitations in the brain. This theory holds that each mental state is identical with a certain state of the

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<sup>3</sup> Mamardashvili, Pyatigorsky, 20.



brain, that the mental state and the corresponding neural state are essentially the same thing. Followers of this theory of identity believe that, though mental states can indeed be conceived independently from the material systems that generate them, and could exist *per se*, actually such mental states coincide fully with their material substrate. Philosophers who adhere to this theory of identity often illustrate their concept with this example: ontologically, a cloud of particles is different from, say, a chair that these particles form, but, actually, the cloud of particles and the chair are one and the same. In relation to Mamardashvili, this ‘eliminativism’ is representative of ‘the struggle against consciousness’.

Apart from physiological reductionism, there are other methods that eliminate consciousness from their accounts (e.g. theories equating consciousness as such with its functional potential). Such theories treat mental states as functional states. The basic thesis of functionalism consists in the idea of transferring consciousness from its carrier (the human brain) to other possible carriers. In other words, certain functional states can be ‘run’ on fundamentally dissimilar physical systems, chiefly on computers. Thus, the function of consciousness can be performed not only by biological systems (the human brain) but also, for example, by information systems. Such theories reduce consciousness as well – this time, to its functional operations.

Mamardashvili does not endorse reductive strategies for understanding the nature of consciousness. His human ‘has consciousness. This means that he can experience and feel the very things or states that cannot be obtained naturally – say, as a product of some physiological mechanism’.<sup>4</sup> Even if we thoroughly examine an actively functioning brain and study all the processes that occur in it, we will not be able to understand the exact way in which it induces perception, which must, then, be essentially distinct from the physical processes occurring in the brain, and cannot be deduced from physical facts. This represents an objection to the theory of identity, in saying that the thesis of identity of mental and physical processes is void of any clear meaning – in contrast with the identity of the chair and the cloud of particles. In the latter case, we can specify precisely the conditions of identification, imagining, for instance, that we could observe the boundaries of the particles’ continuous motion, fixing their positions relative to other particles, comparing the data, etc. Yet, in the case of the identity of mental and physical processes, we do not have any such criteria at our disposal. The identity of the chair and the cloud

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4 Merab Mamardashvili, ‘The Problem of Consciousness and the Philosophical Vocation’ [‘Проблема сознания и философское призвание’], *Voprosy filosofii*, 8, 1988, 39.

of particles depends on equating two objects of the same substantial origin (that origin being physical in the case). However, when we attempt to equate the brain with consciousness, we are, in fact, trying to declare the sameness of different substances.

There are certain counterarguments against the functional theory as well. We are able, for instance, to imagine a situation when we are observing the implementation of a functional table on a specific device (such as a device for solving mathematical problems), which is by no means accompanied with anything like 'personal experience'. Mental states, then, can always be declared supplemental to functional operations; consequently, it would not be correct to imagine them as ontologically equivalent.

Another reason why psychophysical reductionism does not suit Mamardashvili is that philosophy, in his opinion, should deal only with such 'objectivities' that are essentially immediate 'given entities' in relation to consciousness, and thus represent the nearest objects for the latter. Only structures that have the potential to furnish direct conscious experience – the experience of understanding – are eligible to be objects of philosophical analysis. On the other hand, knowledge of the functioning of neural correlates cannot yield any such experience, for it cannot be 'lived through' as a private experience of one's own consciousness.

Even though some philosophers of consciousness would not accept such a phenomenological procedure for demonstrating the indivisibility of consciousness and would substantiate their theories with empirical evidence (namely, that the mechanical action on the brain causes mental changes), such evidence by no means constitutes a reason to believe that we are dealing with an organ that *generates* consciousness. A textbook example in common currency is that interferences in a television's reception bear no relation to the picture that we see on the television. The idea being illustrated consists in assigning a mediating function to the brain. In the physicalist line of arguments, the principal proposition is that there is no consciousness without brain activity; therefore, the physical activity of the brain is a prerequisite for the existence of consciousness. On the other hand, if we consider neural states as physiological *correlates* of consciousness, the question will assume a different form: 'Are the physical states of the brain consciousness itself – or are they something that *accompanies* consciousness?' In reductionism, the following line of reasoning would be invoked: if, in the absence of some object or attribute (brain and its function), another object or attribute does not exist, then the former must be a pre-requisite for the latter. Yet, against such an irrefutable argument, we can propose a formal logical objection that the entire structure of the argument has the form of the trivial fallacy '*post hoc ergo propter hoc*' ('after this, therefore

because of this'). Mamardashvili, however, would not have accepted this as a valid objection, since consciousness is neither an object nor an attribute.

Another reductionist theory of consciousness proposes *reduction to language*, and it is also deemed erroneous by Mamardashvili. In spite of the fact that the experience of understanding consciousness must take the form of language, we cannot derive from this a one-to-one coincidence of language and consciousness. Language requires no individual consciousness in order to exist, and the presence of language is not enough to prove the existence of consciousness. The disposal of language has great potential for automatism, and, in this respect, can occur along the lines of linguistic patterns requiring no phenomenological experience of consciousness. *Symbol and Consciousness* notes that

we can assume that some structures of linguistic thinking must be connected with the *absence* of consciousness, rather than its presence. ... A text can be generated by some linguistic mechanism, while consciousness cannot be, first of all because consciousness appears within a text not by virtue of some linguistic patterns (i.e. from within the text), but exclusively in virtue of the patterns of consciousness itself.<sup>5</sup>

In all cases when we speak of the functional, linguistic or any other activity of consciousness, the question is whether such activity should be equated with consciousness itself or with its active manifestation. According to Mamardashvili, each such state involves its proper experience of consciousness, yet they cannot be reduced to consciousness as such. Consciousness is present in each such state, but the sum of these states cannot be equated with consciousness. Each such state is, rather, 'not quite consciousness'. Mamardashvili does not suggest that there is some substantially understood consciousness, which would further manifest itself in various observable states; for him, it is important to emphasize that, even before we begin addressing consciousness and studying it as an 'object', consciousness already exists and makes such a study possible. Consciousness always outstrips the procedure of its objectification; it is resistant to being turned into an object, and should not be treated as such.

Let us consider a simple example, assuming that we have a certain researcher of consciousness who is willing to study consciousness in laboratory conditions. Let us assume that she does not favor introspection, and

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<sup>5</sup> Mamardashvili, Pyatigorsky, 20.

therefore intends to study someone else's consciousness instead of her own. Let us assume that she needs to get an idea of what another human being feels while listening to a Chopin waltz or when scrutinizing a painting by Malevich. Our researcher does not endeavor to provide a neurophysiological picture of the brain's response in the course of perception. Her task is to reproduce the *mental experience* of the recipient. In some sense, this requires that she feel the same as test subject does. Is it possible? What is the researcher going to feel in this case? Common sense would suggest that she would feel *her own* emotions arising as the result of her attempts to imagine the feelings of her subject. In other words, she will be left alone with her own consciousness, in spite of her attempts to identify with the consciousness of another.

This example is powerful enough for a case when we wish to see the world through somebody else's eyes. When we speak of difficulties in reproducing somebody else's individual consciousness by means of our own consciousness, most people will agree that such a task is almost unachievable. However, when we create various theories of consciousness, we sometimes tend to overlook similar difficulties. Mamardashvili means to say that such difficulties do exist in cases when we attempt to create *theories of consciousness in general* and to explain consciousness through something that it is not. In this manner, physicalist theories of consciousness that reduce it to brain activity assume a position over and above consciousness, seeking to give it a physical explanation. The point here is to speak in the language of physicalism and to explain consciousness using such language. This is what Mamardashvili deems impossible, since a researcher *is* endowed with consciousness, and his or her physicalist theory is solely meaningful as comprehended by a consciousness. To frame the task of speaking of consciousness in the context of any language other than the proper language of consciousness is to conceive a paradox.

According to Mamardashvili, consciousness-studying programs that attempt to speak of consciousness in the language of physics, sociology or psychology are, in a way, trying to eliminate consciousness itself. This happens because they try to replace consciousness with physics, social relations or behavioral automatisms. All theories of consciousness that seek to reduce it to something else lose consciousness as such somewhere along their journey. With regard to consciousness, all concepts of philosophical reductionism have one thing in common: they fail to define exactly what it is that they are trying to reduce. All that can be done under such an agenda is to place consciousness in a 'black box' and to observe the processes that accompany its mysterious inhabiting of that box. The only result of this study will be that consciousness will remain obscure to our understanding.

For Mamardashvili, there is no harm in admitting that we do not understand consciousness or in concluding that consciousness belongs among mysterious substances that defy explanation. Such an admission needn't embarrass a philosopher. This has often happened in the history of philosophy, and a thinker has the right to say that a problem cannot be solved, provided that he or she supplies the reasons. Kantian antinomies and Wittgenstein's negative statements are some of the best-known instances of such skepticism. This is relatively benign, compared to the hazard of mistaking the solution of one problem for the solution of an entirely different problem, and of misappropriating the laurels of intellectual triumph. In the case of reductive philosophies, we are dealing with something of that latter kind. After all the sophisticated and extensive reductive manipulations, consciousness remains the same mysterious substance that it was before the study; the reductionists, however, feel that they have succeeded in *explaining* consciousness – while, in reality, they have merely described its accompanying attributes.

At the same time, the experience of consciousness turns out to be inevitably more extensive than any objects or phenomena expected to 'generate' consciousness. This can be explained by a few very simple examples. For instance, when we say 'I feel pleasure', this pleasure cannot be logically distinguished from the consciousness of pleasure. Similarly, there is no 'anxious consciousness' but 'a consciousness of anxiety', for anxiety cannot precede the state of being conscious of it. Similarly, there is some inevitable enmeshment between the gaze and the object at which it is directed (here, Mamardashvili follows the phenomenological tradition and its principle of intentionality), and, in our case, there is enmeshment of the conscious subject and the object of which the subject is conscious.

It is quite apparent how cunningly consciousness can behave when we attempt to precondition it by anything. With regard to psychophysiological preconditioning, can it be that brain activity preconditions the experience of consciousness? What can be wrong here? Simple logic prevents us from upholding this structure. We have to admit: even if the brain induces my consciousness, this entire pattern nevertheless exists in my consciousness – it is given to me as a conscious experience. Another possibility of preconditioning: let us assume that we believe that social roles, social mechanisms or certain cultural patterns bring about consciousness. Here, the same logic of inversion would apply: to actualize social roles, preceding conscious experience is requisite.

Finally, we could say that consciousness is a consequence of language – and here, too, we will encounter difficulties, for, to make use of language, we have to understand the meanings that it contains, and this would imply the existence of consciousness. From all of the above, we can conclude that consciousness

is structured in such a way that it is always already present within the thing that is assumed to be its source. Indeed, if we look closely at what is believed to be the force that induces consciousness – be it the body or language or culture (there may be further variants, such as the unconscious in psychoanalysis, Schopenhauer's will of the world, Nietzschean will to power, Divinity, etc.) – all of these possibilities are essentially different names for different kinds of conscious experience. Their meanings are contextualized within consciousness as such, with reference to it, and within the bounds of conscious understanding and witnessing.

Mamardashvili's idea, then, is as follows: no matter what account we give (either that consciousness *can be reduced* to physical processes or, on the contrary that consciousness *cannot be reduced* to them), all of them will be logically flawed, since each will prove to be an actualization of some experience of consciousness. This experience of consciousness appears to outstrip our accounts, as it is extremely difficult to isolate the 'consciousness' that we are trying to discuss from the 'consciousness' that makes such discussion possible. In other words, any answer to the question of consciousness already belongs to consciousness – as does the understanding of such an answer. Only out of the experience of consciousness – and not the experience of neural, linguistic or social activity – can we address consciousness and pose questions regarding its particulars. Similarly, the relationship between consciousness and the body can only be expressed in the language of consciousness, in the form of a meaningful utterance implying conscious understanding. The meaning of the utterance 'consciousness is induced by neural activity' is not itself physical. At the same time, meaning is, by definition, a part of conscious experience, and, in some sense, always a part of *my own* experience. Consciousness is uneliminable and irreducible; it cannot be withdrawn from any personal experience, even from the experience of giving up consciousness completely. An attempt to negate consciousness is bound to be but another manifestation of the latter, since a hypothetical negation of consciousness must involve, first, a certain understanding of consciousness and its retention as a quasi-object, and, second, being consciously aware of the situation. We must be conscious of consciousness itself in order to consciously negate it.

If we were to attempt a mental experiment and try to imagine our consciousness as non-existent, we would need our own consciousness to successfully complete the experiment (or to ascertain its impossibility). Similarly, when it is declared that there is no consciousness but only physical states of the brain or some other substrate, consciousness is required to make such declarations *meaningful*. Here is another simple example. To describe consciousness *in an objective manner*, as various theories demand, an investigator would have to

'step out' of his consciousness, to examine it from the outside, and then return to his consciousness and resume his mental life as if nothing has happened. It seems, however, that coping with such a task would involve considerable difficulty. We cannot ask any questions about consciousness once we step beyond its limits. All problematizing of consciousness must occur within the limits of consciousness itself, since such problematizing is first induced by consciousness. This is connected with consciousness's identity with the subject; as something 'closest' to the subject, it can neither be abandoned nor separated from the subject – even though such 'distancing' constitutes the precondition of any practical investigation.

How shall we understand and describe consciousness, then? Mamardashvili says that in this very question we can discern the fundamental impracticability of reductions in this regard. No matter what we try to reduce consciousness to, we will be returning to consciousness itself; we will forever go around in circles and stumble upon consciousness, again and again, failing to define it. We will resemble a person trying to step on his own shadow or an animal trying to catch its own tail. Ultimately, all theories that seek to explain consciousness through something other than itself overlook the fact that all representations of things that are not consciousness must nevertheless involve consciousness itself. There is consciousness of non-consciousness, and this circumstance presents an obstacle to our efforts to create even a semi-traditional theory of consciousness. On the other hand, the 'consciousness of consciousness' is a structure so rickety that we must at once understand the hopelessness of our efforts. If an investigator's reflection upon consciousness must coincide with consciousness itself, the investigation has but little chance of progress. But if consciousness is so stubborn in denying us any opportunity to speak of it in any language other than its own, we must acknowledge that *the best way of describing consciousness will be the way belonging to consciousness itself.*

Mamardashvili maintains that none of the theories of consciousness are viable for the exact reason that *consciousness can never become an object for us.* Of course, it is not easy to stop thinking of consciousness as an object. First and foremost, language itself hinders us in doing so. Indeed, even when we pronounce the word 'consciousness', we cannot but cast it into a subject-predicate form. However, if we wish to conduct an adequate investigation of consciousness, we will have to resist the natural logic of language. We should remember at all times that consciousness is not an object – by virtue of the following two reasons. First, any 'attempt at such a description already involves those means

and conditions whose origin ... is to be inquired into'.<sup>6</sup> Second, to become conscious of consciousness, one would have to pause it: 'Consciousness turns into cognition; it ceases to be consciousness for the duration.'<sup>7</sup>

But if the creation of a standard theory of consciousness is so difficult, then, taking these difficulties into account, we could attempt to construct some special theory of consciousness, what Mamardashvili would call a *meta-theory of consciousness*. A *meta-theory of consciousness* is a *theory of understanding consciousness rather than explaining it*. The term 'meta-theory' is introduced specially to oppose the theory of understanding consciousness to any other, 'normal' theory. Strictly speaking, *the theory of consciousness is an abnormal theory*. Within its scope, we do not try to speak of consciousness in languages that are different from consciousness's own language (such as the language of neural correlates or functional states); instead, we problematize consciousness within the limits of consciousness itself. Thus, within the scope of Mamardashvili's meta-theory, we may try to explain the special features that are not grasped by the ordinary theory. 'Special features' are understood by Mamardashvili as those in which the object of analysis is identical to the corresponding interpretation thereof. The 'method of description' and the 'thing being described' turn out to be fundamentally indistinguishable from one other. Such effects usually elude being studied by traditional theories that draw a clear-cut distinction between the 'object' and the 'language for describing the object', and should be considered within the framework of the special meta-theory. Here, one should use an interpretive procedure. Such procedure should eliminate the distinction between the interpretation and the object thereof. This approach suggests the coincidence of description and the thing being described, of the 'what' and the 'how'.

For Mamardashvili, the attribute of coincidence is very important, for he thinks of it as a major attribute of consciousness. In all cases where we see such coincidence of object and the method of its description, we come across the experience of consciousness. In other words, the experience of consciousness is fundamentally *performative*. Let us recall the structure of performative utterances: we say 'I swear it' or 'I promise', and, by virtue of the utterance itself, we effect an oath or a promise. The form of such utterances coincides with their content; there is no need to expand them in order to enable them to perform their function. Further, if we were to attempt such an expansion, we would see them turn into meaningless tautologies – for we would have to say 'I promise

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6 Ibid., 25.

7 Ibid., 20.



that I promise' or 'I swear that I swear'. Further expansion of performative utterances would entail the problem of infinite regress, in phrases like 'I swear that I swear that I swear, etc.', or 'I promise that I promise that I promise, etc.'. These features of performative utterances in fact mirror the peculiarities of the experience of consciousness. Acts of consciousness are themselves of performative nature; the 'what' of my thought is given to me, its thinker, as the 'how' of that same thought. Strictly speaking, 'what' I think and 'how' I think it must coincide, because the 'how' of my thinking is, at the same time, the 'what' of my thinking. Of course, I can clarify my thought and elaborate it, but that will amount to another thought (or thoughts), another coincidence of the 'what' and the 'how'. Phenomena of this kind form the objects of meta-theory, and 'wherever such a property is apparent, we are dealing with what can be conventionally referred to as consciousness'.<sup>8</sup>

We now have an idea of at least the initial stage of working with consciousness: observation and description, rather than explanation. The investigation of consciousness undertaken by Mamardashvili is essentially an attempt to speculate about consciousness in its own language, without resorting to the reductions in common currency, be it to the body, to language or to cultural experience. In a way, Mamardashvili proposes to reduce the reductions themselves, enabling the opening of a certain field of 'pure' meta-theoretical description of consciousness. If it is not possible to work with consciousness directly, we should try working with the understanding of consciousness. A meta-theory, in this case, is a 'quasi-theory', in the practice of which we are made aware that consciousness acts as 'something' within which we dwell, forever and irrevocably, and which can be neither objectified nor alienated. All we can do is keep trying to grasp ourselves through acts of understanding.

For Mamardashvili, then, the philosophy of consciousness is a philosophy teetering on the edge of the inexpressible, an attempt to describe the indescribable. It is, *an impossible possibility*. If this unattainable goal is to be attained at all, this can only be accomplished within the limits of consciousness, without attempting to reduce it to non-consciousness. We are unable to explain our thinking, since all our attempts to do so must merely reproduce it. And yet, if consciousness cannot be explained, we may at least try to understand it. In some sense, we have to admit that in the question 'How should we explain consciousness?' consciousness confirms the impossibility of its elimination, for 'explanation' is but another term for 'consciousness'.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 37.

## The Spontaneity of Consciousness

Throughout Mamardashvili's work, consciousness is introduced through a clearly formulated hypothesis, as follows: 'Consciousness is not a mental process in the classical psychophysical meaning of this term.'<sup>1</sup> In other words, human consciousness is essentially something entirely different from the psyche or mentality; it 'can be described without relying on the possibility of mapping it to a particular psychophysical subject, an individual.'<sup>2</sup> A reasonable question arises: On what is this hypothesis based? And why would we need to describe consciousness without attaching it to an individual, a subject? The reason is simple: 'We introduce the "sphere of consciousness" as a concept that allows those very contradictions that are caused by the use of the concepts of "subject" and "object"';

those contradictions to which we are led by the very distinction between the object domain as something naturally existing, and the subject domain which also exists naturally but possesses, in addition, some mental or pseudo-mental features and qualities distinct from those of the object domain.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, according to Mamardashvili, the concepts of subject and object – and subject-object logic – are not merely dualistic; they contain inherent unresolvable contradictions, which preclude the construction of an adequate account of consciousness. All attempts to solve such contradictions are bound to be counterproductive; it is more practicable to give up the endeavor of describing consciousness in terms of subject-object dualism, due to its inherent insuperable difficulties.

Let us try to demonstrate this together with Mamardashvili, who proposes that in classical philosophy consciousness was understood as some object – something pertaining to a human being (its subject), for whom the possession of consciousness with all its relevant contents is the most reliable starting point. Also according to the classical concept of consciousness, the latter can be defined through *self-consciousness* (or self-reflection), or as the 'knowledge

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1 Ibid., 37.

2 Ibid., 39.

3 Ibid., 40.

of knowledge'. What we call 'consciousness' (translatable from the Russian etymologically as '*co-knowledge*', or 'participative knowledge') can be said to exist when the fact of knowledge has been established twice: it is not sufficient just to know – to be properly conscious, a person should *know that he knows*. Self-consciousness, besides, is introduced in philosophy as a unique ability for *neutral reflection*. Both words are key to this notion. 'Reflection' means the ability of consciousness to witness its own activity while remaining *the very same consciousness*. 'Neutral' means that consciousness is given to itself 'as is', 'in truth', without distortion; the privileged access of consciousness to itself consists in that knowledge of knowledge that is *always true*. (It should be remembered that in the 'knowledge of knowledge' model, knowledge of the first order (knowledge of objects) may be false, whereas knowledge of the second order (knowledge of knowledge) is always true. It may be illustrated by the following example: Perhaps I know that crocodiles live in oceans. This knowledge of mine is false, and I may find out that I made a mistake with respect to these animals and their habitat. But I cannot make a mistake with respect to my knowledge (or awareness) of my own knowledge.)

The principle of self-consciousness has always been, for classical philosophical epistemology, a certain kind of magic wand. Each time the question 'How can consciousness be a subject of study?' arises, the philosopher's answer tends to address the 'magic' properties of consciousness itself (such as transparency and self-orientation). All this seems quite convincing; and yet, if we agree with it, we will fall into the inescapable trap of paradox. It is the naïveté of such concepts of consciousness that Mamardashvili seeks to expose. His first critical attack is against the most general statement that 'consciousness is knowledge of knowledge'. The principal objection is that when consciousness is understood as 'knowledge of knowledge', the dualist subject-predicate model is applied, causing, in turn, a number of logical difficulties. These can be illustrated as follows.

If we are to attempt to make consciousness an object, there must be, in that case, something that is conscious of that very consciousness, which comes to be objectified in the course of the analysis. But, if we assume the existence of this pair of 'conscious subject' and 'object that the subject is conscious of', it must call for a third term, so that the 'conscious subject' could then become an object of which something else yet is conscious. We are here presented with a choice. The first option is to arbitrarily 'stop' at some element of the sequence something (an object) of which Subject 1 is conscious, of which, in turn, Subject 2 is conscious, of which, in turn, Subject 3 is conscious, etc. In this case, if we make an arbitrary, deliberate 'stop', the entire sequence will be lost in the unconscious, since we will lose not only the assumed 'object', but

also the pole of the hypothetical 'subject'. It turns out that we will come across self-consciousness, which is not conscious of itself (in being an oxymoron). The second option is to consent to infinite regress, which will get us nowhere (even though it will keep leading us *somewhere*). From this, we can conclude the inapplicability of the subject-object pattern to consciousness, and that the consciousness which is conscious coincides with the consciousness that the former consciousness is conscious of. In other words, consciousness, which is conscious of something (as a subject) is integrated with the consciousness that it is conscious of (as its object). This latter circumstance brings Mamardashvili to propose that the best approach is the one under which consciousness is conceptualized only within a certain phenomenological circle.

First and foremost, Mamardashvili tries to abandon the philosophical pattern of analysis of consciousness that implies the existence of consciousness as a subject and as something that such a consciousness is conscious of – since, in this case, such a pair ('consciousness' and 'something that such a consciousness is conscious of') should be supplemented with a third member, so that the 'conscious subject' could become, in turn, an object of which something else is conscious. Mamardashvili refers to this third member as 'Descartes's third eye', and to the above-described argument as 'Descartes's paradox', since it was Descartes who first clearly assigned to consciousness its wonderful ability to know itself (or to know the world and, at the same time, to know the one who knows it). 'Descartes's third eye' (which, in the extreme case, leads into infinity) marked the incipience of a special, Modern European vision of the nature of self-consciousness. Mamardashvili, who disagreed with the Modern approach, was, on this point, more inclined to adopt the phenomenological interpretation of consciousness as one that cannot objectify itself by taking a self-alienating stance; in general, this means that there is no need to apply the logic of two to consciousness, since consciousness of oneself is not a relation within a pair. If we wish to avoid infinite regress, we must assume that consciousness stands in direct relation to itself, which constitutes the pure immanence of the experience of consciousness.

There is another case when we encounter the undesirable prospect of infinite regress. Should we maintain the subject-object pair as a representation of consciousness, we would encounter yet another paradox: in order to get to know something, I must already know *how* I would know it and also *what* I would know; yet, to know these things, I must know *what* and *how* I would know in the latter case, and so on, indefinitely. Methods of describing or explaining consciousness as a field of objects result in this type of infinite regress, since, with respect to such fields of objects, reflective self-verification procedures are needed as well.

Such logical paradoxes are brought about by attempts to access consciousness via the same framework of logical categories that itself constitutes the fundamental property of consciousness. It is far from clear what constitutes a meta-description in this case. Further, consciousness itself serves as a pre-condition for the possibility of handling such categories. Consciousness cannot be defined via subject-object or genus-species distinctions, not only because it is neither an 'object' nor a 'species' (nor, for that matter a 'subject' or a 'genus'), but also because consciousness inevitably 'precedes' all such distinctions. My consciousness is not an object for the simple reason that it is my self. References to 'another' consciousness would be of no use here, for a person has but the experience of personal consciousness, through which alone all 'other' experience is made available.

Consciousness, then, in being a pre-condition for the objectification of the outer world, is not itself subject to objectification itself. (The first intelligible explication of these difficulties occurs in Husserl's phenomenology, from which it follows that subject-object mechanism is not applicable to consciousness, and that the consciousness that is conscious coincides with the consciousness of which the former is conscious. The intentionality principle contains the idea of the inevitable enmeshment of the gaze and its object, and of the conscious subject with the object of its consciousness – the original unity of subject and object.) The general meaning of the problem with applying the dualistic principle ('knowledge of knowledge') to consciousness consists in that when we shift to the position of being observed we lose touch with the position of observing. Paradoxes are engendered by what had been established, in classical philosophy, as the domain of 'sovereign understanding': when we say that we understand *something*, we assume that the 'something' in question is not itself capable of understanding. The subject, understood to be endowed with consciousness, is distinct from the object, which is deprived of the same.

In light of this analysis of dualistic descriptions of consciousness, Mamardashvili conceptualizes the 'sphere of consciousness', a concept summoned to help solve the paradoxes of the classical theory. If we are to accept the hypothesis of the identity of subject and object, we will be able to imagine a more general order of description than that which is made possible under the subject-object distinction. Without the 'subject-object' pair as the primary pattern for speculation, a different pattern for abstraction and synthesis can be introduced. This new pattern will be termed the 'sphere of consciousness'. At first glance, the 'sphere of consciousness' is defined via an opposition resembling the classical one (with consciousness acting as the observer and the observed). The object of observation here takes the form of 'certain facts, objects and events of consciousness'. Yet, the 'sphere of consciousness' is not

a certain subject, understood as a universal basis of observation within the scope of the reflexive procedure. The sphere of consciousness includes both object-properties and subject-properties.

It may be argued that common sense should compel us to connect consciousness with the subject. When we say that consciousness represents 'the subjective pole', it is crucial to avoid the trap that language itself appears to set out for us. By equating consciousness with the subject, we inevitably invite the question of the availability of an object (for common sense and logic both tell us that there is no subject without an object). There is no such thing as an empty consciousness; consciousness always stands in relation to something. This idea, known in phenomenology as the principle of intentionality, is actively employed by Mamardashvili. Intentionality is understood in phenomenology as a certain external aim: a thought cannot be empty but requires some content. This fundamental provision of phenomenology is easy to demonstrate by trying, just briefly, to think of nothing. This will prove to be impossible, since every 'nothing' we might try to think of will turn out to be a 'something', supplying the content of thought. This 'of-something-ness' is neither an attribute nor a property of the thought; it is, instead, its fundamental constitutive, since it is by virtue of its directedness that a thought is structured as such. According to the principle of intentionality, an object is always already within consciousness.

Phenomenologists emphasize that intentionality is not a property of the subject but the subject itself. Without intentionality, there can be no subject as such. This is effectively a warning against the mistake of conceiving the subject as something self-contained. The subject and subjective experience begin with the occurrence of a holding directedness towards the object-pole, reciprocally constitutive of the subject-pole within the field. The perceiver and the perceived always *hold each other* in a single act of grasping, never preceding one another. In view of this introduction of intentionality to the very heart of our discussion, we can now amend the traditional philosophical vocabulary and abandon speaking of 'subjects' altogether, to avoid any misleading associations.

The first thing we notice when observing the experience of consciousness is that the structure of an event in consciousness is different from the structure of physical events in the world. Further, not only does an event in consciousness defy description in terms of subject-object duality; it also defies analysis in terms of 'substance' and 'event'. In classical philosophy, with which Mamardashvili again has to differ, real existence is the prerogative of substances, whereas events are essentially contingent, owing their existence to something else, not being endowed with independent being. With respect to the events of consciousness, there is no possibility of distinguishing substances

from events. Events in consciousness attain independent existence, requiring no substance to sustain them. Under these conditions, an event is transformed into something that phenomenology might refer to as a *phenomenon*. The structure of the events (or states) of consciousness is constructed from phenomena, understood as integral formations of consciousness that cannot be analyzed or explained through something else. When I see the façade of the building opposite my window, this constitutes a phenomenon in my consciousness. A phenomenon is self-sufficient, and phenomenology then takes the step of 'bracketing' the outer world, in order to concentrate on the phenomena of consciousness.

Having demonstrated the inapplicability of subject-object dualism and of the 'substance-event' distinction to consciousness, Mamardashvili further attempts to show that it would be wrong to speak of consciousness in terms of causal relations. This is accounted for by strictly formal reasons: if we are to give up dualism, we must also part ways with causality, as based in subject-object patterns, where the cause functions as a 'subject' and its effect as an 'object'. And yet, the abandonment of causation-based descriptive methods has further substantial grounds. Mamardashvili emphasizes: my last thought – for instance, the arrival at an understanding of a certain idea – does not at all lead me (as cause might lead to effect) to some new understanding at present. No matter how obvious some idea might have been when I was conscious of it yesterday, today I have to start 'from scratch' on my way to new understanding. Understanding, according to Mamardashvili, is a process that is always undertaken 'from scratch'; it has neither a history nor a causal connection with the past. It would be much better, for that reason, if we were to give up causal approaches to describing consciousness.

It would be much easier to verify this idea with reference to examples from the psychology of understanding. What is meant here are certain well-known situations when, after going through all the steps towards the solution of a problem, we still cannot find it, since we do not understand it. If I am reading an extract from some philosophical text, sentence by sentence, it may so happen that I will fail to understand the meaning of what I have read (in spite, perhaps, of some momentary shadow of an insight). In other words, step-by-step transition from Idea 1 to Idea 2 to Idea 3 may not bring me to Idea 4: the cause does not guarantee an effect. Strictly speaking, my understanding is not guaranteed by anything but occurs as if regardless of anything that might affect it. Of course, it would be an exaggeration to say that an idea could occur to us without being preceded by any preliminary speculation.

Still, we understand that performing what actions might lead us to a thought does not guarantee this thought's ultimate occurrence. In the same

way, according to Mamardashvili, one can never reconstruct the path that brought another thinker to a specific idea. You cannot show, step by step, just *how* Newton might have arrived at his idea of gravity. We might be able to reconstruct his successive reasoning to some extent, yet at length we will find ourselves speaking of some 'mental leap' in the course of our reconstruction. Nothing in the course of his speculations could have pre-determined the arrival of this particular idea. It is evident that identical intellectual steps do not have to bring about identical intellectual results.

This motif is connected to another of Mamardashvili's considerations – namely, the revisiting of the classical concept of *self-consciousness* and of the doubt concerning the ability of consciousness to remain impartial with respect to itself. Classical philosophy understood the latter as the capacity of consciousness to monitor its own activities. The basic feature of such self-monitoring is the passivity of the reflective function, which neither adds nor takes anything away, apart from maintaining a record of consciousness and its activities as such. This provision is consistent with an important assumption of the classical philosophy that 'the most veridical point of reference for any conscious phenomenon is the *givenness of consciousness*'.<sup>4</sup> Following this thesis, it was assumed that consciousness should experience itself, meaning that its states allow it to confidently say that it knows its motives.

This classical idea is just what Mamardashvili puts in doubt, following a major blow dealt to this idea by psychoanalysis, which drastically altered the concept of consciousness. Instead of the classical formula of consciousness ('I know that I know'), psychoanalysis suggested its own formula ('I do not know that I know'). The latter is nothing but the definition of the unconscious, which makes it evident that the unconscious itself can have room for knowledge. The unconscious indeed possesses its own *knowledge*, keeping it well out of reach of the Cartesian 'light of reason'. Its obscurity means that we sometimes cannot even guess that we possess any such knowledge. This idea can be illustrated by a series of examples. For instance, if we are asked about whether we know that we did not come into life as a result of the union of winged monkeys, we will probably discover that we do know the answer, though we never thought of it before, nor thought ourselves in possession of the answer to this question. There are, of course, more serious examples of this human ability to answer questions to which we should seemingly have no answers. Often, unexpectedly to ourselves, we find ourselves in possession of information we did not know we had. Mamardashvili tells us that, should the term 'consciousness' be applied

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4 Ibid., 43.



to the spontaneously-occurring processes of the unconscious, it would lose its form and definite meaning. What we encounter here is what Mamardashvili himself would have termed a 'phenomenological paradox'.

It is crucial that any conscious act must be preconditioned by acts that have occurred *apart from self-consciousness*, while remaining inaccessible to the latter. What is meant here is that there is some 'non-objectified remainder' in thinking, which indeed *constitutes* thinking as such. This statement can be easily verified: a subject would have difficulty in finding a clear answer to the simple question '*How* do we think?' An answer to such a question would, in all likelihood, have the form of a tautology, involving some description of thinking through thinking itself. We can agree that when one sees a thing, one understands that it is properly *he*, or *she*, who sees it. The problem is that we cannot see *how* it is that we see. Do we understand *how* we understand? Can there be some algorithm for analyzing the procedure of understanding in such a way as to enable someone to reproduce it? Should we accept this line of thought, we would find no difficulty in accepting the consequence that, with respect to our thinking, it would be right to say that understanding sometimes happens *to* us.

Suppose that we have the task of solving some mathematical problem or guessing a word. We accomplish this task, but, when asked to explain *how* we came to our solution, all we can do is to *replicate* it. In most cases, the pretense of explaining the process of thinking proceeds by merely reproducing that process. We can demonstrate our solution but have difficulty with explicating its genesis. Similarly, on first reading, the proof of the Pythagorean Theorem may fail to trigger its understanding. We might understand it on second reading and once again lose touch with that understanding when reading the proof for the third time. We may well remember the fact of our past understanding, and still not be in possession of the same understanding at the present moment. There was understanding, but now it's gone. It can be said, then, that understanding comes *to* us. Language itself is quite illustrative here: when we say that an idea 'has occurred to me', we communicate the intuition of ourselves as observers of the work of consciousness, which is itself inaccessible to us and but partially within our control. When we describe the operations of consciousness, we speak *post factum*, as about things that have already transpired. Mamardashvili emphasizes this by referring to 'the fact of consciousness' – it occurs by itself and can only be witnessed (and not in any way altered) by an observer.

We are unconscious of many of our own mental operations, such as those involved in speech or in arithmetical calculations. No one would argue against the fact that, when speaking, we do not cogitate over our native grammar. When performing a mental task, we may feel somewhat 'irrelevant' to the mental process that proceeds along its own set of rules, as if independently

of the thinking subject: problems are solved, verses are recalled, sentences are formed, images are drawn – without any apparent active involvement of the conscious self.

What, then, is the relationship between self-consciousness and pre-reflective thinking (*'cogito'*)? According to Mamardashvili, they are wholly irrelevant to one another; further, they are not even *transparent* to one another. Their relationship is such that self-consciousness is not a neutral but an active process that *alters* consciousness. This problem was described years back in Hindu philosophy: if I fix something as a fact of my consciousness, my state of consciousness will thereby be altered, meaning that 'I' will no longer be the same. Psychologists often speak of the reciprocal inhibition of the conscious and the unconscious processes of consciousness. To invoke the classic example, a millipede who stops to ponder the nature of its movement will freeze in perplexity, unable to decide which of her tarsi to move first. Similarly, the experience of mastering a foreign language makes evident the difficulty of deploying grammatical structures while retaining them in conscious attention. To sum up:

One can approach consciousness in both conscious and unconscious ways. In the unconscious approach, consciousness is considered a case of reflection or cognition, that is, consciousness itself appears as a special cognitive process. Then it just 'remains in place', 'nothing happens' to it. But here we proceed from a somewhat wild assumption that at the moment, now, while reasoning about the problem of consciousness when we, as we say, are 'working with consciousness', we eliminate it as some kind of spontaneous natural process. What we wind up with at this point is our struggle against consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

This means that when we are actually thinking, we have no witnesses for our thinking experience; yet, as soon as such a witness appears, thinking comes to an end. Hence, we can draw the paradoxical conclusion concerning the unconscious nature of the processes of consciousness. Our manner of referring to the experience of self-apprehension as 'consciousness' signals a naïve attempt at meeting with ourselves. As it turns out, we cannot gain access to our own consciousness. Even if we are to gain entry to its sanctum, we are bound to find it vacant, 'consciousness' having just been there – and 'left'. Our attempts to understand 'how consciousness works' alter the processes we wish to inquire

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 41.

into – the processes that ordinarily flow undisturbed. Roughly speaking, our inquiring presence disrupts the ordinary operations of consciousness.

Peculiarly, in attempting to describe consciousness, we eliminate the conditions of its existence. The result is comparable to what is achieved if one tries to find out what things are like when one is not there. While I am not there, I cannot observe it; as soon as I am there to observe it, the setting ceases to be what I seek to observe. We can propose other naïve examples. Our inability to see our own body whole, in the same way as we see other people's bodies, is a good illustration of how consciousness is structured. We cannot see our body as a whole, because our eyes belong to this very body. Similarly, we cannot explain consciousness, since any explanation would have to belong to that same consciousness. The essence of these difficulties has to do with the classical methods of describing consciousness, which always come across something eluding reflection, though they are themselves inextricably associated with reflection. To solve these difficulties, we must give up the claims of complete understanding that are part and parcel of classical philosophy.

The next stage of this strategy is to incorporate the impermeable pre-reflective consciousness in the account of reflection as such. This development follows directly from the preceding one: since consciousness is not given to itself as an object, though it must always stand in relation to objects in the external world (this being the domain of the intentionality principle), the objectifying consciousness of things is, at the same time, non-objectifying, unselfconscious and unconscious of itself.

Mamardashvili draws from this the conclusion that, contrary to the attitude of classical philosophy, self-consciousness has no special primacy in this matter. Consciousness, it appears, possesses no miraculous capacity for self-reflection. It is not self-consciousness that enables it to disclose itself; quite the contrary, it is the non-self-reflective consciousness that makes self-consciousness possible. There is a certain pre-reflective *cogito*, which constitutes the precondition for the Cartesian *cogito*. That is, each conscious act is preconditioned by certain acts that have already occurred without self-consciousness involved and remain unreflected in my consciousness. The pre-reflective *cogito* precedes the Cartesian *cogito*. A certain 'non-objectified remainder' in thought constitutes the very wellspring of cognition.

This position is consistent with the provisions of classical psychoanalysis with its powerful concept of 'the unconscious', framed so as to involve the non-reflective within the structure of consciousness, thereby enabling the total system's functioning. The unconscious, then, is not an inaccessible and incommunicable region; it communicates with the conscious mind at its own 'discretion', by symbolic means. The psychoanalytical tradition views the

unconscious as actively exchanging image-phantoms with the conscious, the dream zone mediating between the two. Yet no matter what their relationship, it is necessary that, as the precondition of conscious functioning, the unconscious must never be absorbed by the conscious or made a part of it.

To clarify this idea, Mamardashvili introduces the concept of the 'state of consciousness'. The state of consciousness is understood as those operations of consciousness which result in its productivity but defy perception. This state, if we may speak so, is not 'inherent' in the activity of the psyche, since it is not immanent to psyche at all. Reflection may exist in the 'state of consciousness', which is not grasped by reflection itself. When I understand something, the laws that govern my understanding cannot themselves be understood; my understanding forms no part of my experience of understanding; it is not grasped by understanding; it is essentially a projective process. This means that it discloses itself as a result rather than a hidden mechanism. Understanding always comes with a delay: when the work of consciousness is complete, understanding is given to us as an effect or a result, whose possession does not enable us to deduce how this effect or result has been obtained. It is this circumstance that the concept of the 'state of consciousness' is summoned to emphasize, by allowing us

to work on the aspect of our being which cannot be the object (nor the subject) of any positive consideration. Since not everything in mind can be considered objectively (and, to the extent that something cannot be considered objectively, it is consciousness), those things in mind which appear to us without consciousness can be mapped onto consciousness as its states with the introduction of the category 'state of consciousness'.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the fact that we cannot make the work of consciousness transparent and consistently thought-through, we still feel that something has happened *to us* – we feel that understanding has happened *to us*. If there were no such feeling, we would not be able to verify our understanding and to record it as a fact. However, such an experience is accessible for us; the authors attribute it to the 'state of consciousness' as well. It essentially sets the opportunity of 'transferring' consciousness to the sphere of accessible experience. In a similar way, in psychoanalysis, the sphere of the unconscious, which is fundamentally inaccessible in terms of direct experience, becomes accessible indirectly, symbolically, through the specific reading of texts that occur in a psychoanalytical

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6 Ibid., 42.

interview. If we consider psyche as the text of consciousness, we can conclude, then, that the 'the state of consciousness' is an opportunity for consciousness to interpret the mind as its own self.<sup>7</sup>

Not only the psychoanalytic framework, but also the works of other major psychologists (Jean Piaget, for one) and twentieth-century philosophers (Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre) display the idea that the condition of every conscious act are those acts which take place outside of the reflective domain, remaining inaccessible to the latter. We have proposed that a certain 'unobjectifiable remainder' must inhere in thought, though it must also *be* a thought. Of salience in this regard are Piaget's experiments with young children, who performed simple arithmetical actions. When asked *how* they came up with their answers, the children would simply replicate their solutions. Their explanations amounted to a reenactment of their calculations. Extrapolating from these observations, we may conclude that an understanding of the entire multitude of things which make our consciousness accessible does not allow us to understand how this understanding itself is brought about. It is not possible to devise an algorithm which would reveal the process of our understanding in such a way that not only could someone reproduce it, but we could as well, since, as was said before, the re-reading of the Pythagorean Theorem does not guarantee the return of the same state of understanding as we might have experienced the day prior. To say that an insight simply 'occurred *to us*' would help us avoid stretching the truth, and when we say so, the figure of speech is indicative of the real state of affairs.

Mental states (an even better term would be 'mental events', emphasizing that we step out of our role as passive witnesses of our own hidden activity) are given to us in the framework of actuated fact, once 'everything has already happened'. This is also how understanding is constructed: at some point, we become witnesses to our own understanding. Mamardashvili proceeds to ask the following question: once the non-reflective (unthinkable) finally becomes an object of thought, doesn't this entail that this 'unthinkable' is actually quite thinkable, having been posited, defined, and all but explained? What we mean here is not that the contents of the non-reflective become apparent, but only that we have formally arrived at the recognition that this non-reflective region must exist, well in the depths of consciousness. How do we understand this? How does this thought become accessible for us? For, if there is a consciousness of the 'pre-conscious', or reflection upon the 'pre-reflective', an expression

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

of the 'inexpressible', is this not merely a procedure of appropriation by the conscious, by reflection or by language?

Mamardashvili notes that it is the key question revealing the nature of thought and thinking. The appearance of the 'vicious circle' just mentioned signals that thought has reached its limit in achieving alignment with the pure form of thought – in coinciding with itself. The pre-reflective or the unthinkable, in our case, is something that coincides with the 'logical form', as Wittgenstein might have put it, of reflection or thought. The best example of why it is so is the meditative method of successive elimination of all individual, specific states of consciousness, which might depend on our subjectivity – something that will remain after abstracting from anything individual or specific will constitute the 'empty' form of thought, its pure immanence, which is extreme for individual consciousness. But, along with the impossibility of leaving it, there is a possibility to 'place oneself at its edge'. This very well describes the nature of philosophical pursuit.

Following Mamardashvili's logic, consciousness appears to be able to perform some work, yet the subject fails to actualize its subjective powers in its relation, for it neither monitors nor determines nor modifies the process of understanding. Unfortunately, a person cannot command herself to understand something in the same way as she can command herself to raise her right hand. Our efforts with respect to the procedures of understanding can only be indirect; as for direct influence over them, we have none.

All that the carrier of consciousness can do is act as a passive witness and scribe of the observable effects that accompany the hidden processes occurring in the 'black box' of consciousness. Our thought keeps us at a considerable distance: we can take great pains to understand something, and still understanding may fail to occur. On the other hand, it may happen that, in an unheralded moment, we will feel distinctly in possession of the meaning of some idea and its logical relations, so that something that had seemed obscure will be instantaneously illuminated, becoming at once intelligible. In such moments, we have a right to say that we have understood something – although it would be more accurate to say instead that understanding occurred *to* us. Understanding occurs in accordance with its own rules, and a human acts as *an object of understanding*, rather than its subject. To the question 'Who is it that thinks in me?' we might justly answer: 'Thought itself' (though this differs from the customary answer, 'Myself'). Mamardashvili would say that the self knows its own thoughts no sooner than they have already occurred, and cannot 'order' thoughts the way one would order room service in a hotel. No matter how extraordinary this might sound, Mamardashvili would be ready to say that it is the thought that thinks in me rather than my 'self'.

This account challenges the variety of subjective and substantial properties of the self. For Mamardashvili, the self is not a structure but a state of consciousness. This position is related to the difficulties inherent in the objectification of the self, known since David Hume's exposition. The 'self' is not given to us as a thing, a property or a certain entity; it is not given to us at all as long as we try to 'extract' it. Hume demonstrated that no matter how hard we might try to capture our self as something definite, we would only wind up with scrappy impressions (what Mamardashvili calls 'mental impressions'). For instance, we would feel tiredness or buoyancy, comfort or discomfort; we would be visited by various images, thoughts of the past or the future; yet, none of these impressions would amount to the felt experience of a 'self'. A self cannot be felt. It can only be *appended in thought* to what is actually felt and experienced. In light of Mamardashvili's speculations, Hume's remarks yet again appear justified. A 'self' is a state of consciousness that can think of anything except itself. The 'self' cannot objectify itself as a mechanism of thinking. Mamardashvili maintains that a mistaken interpretation often arises when we circumscribe the fact of consciousness within a sphere of the 'self', when we say things like 'I have come up with an idea' or 'I have thought something up'. In spite of this common usage, Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky suggest that more accurate descriptions are already within regular usage. 'An idea has occurred to me' or 'I found myself with the thought of *x*' are closer to the truth, since they implicitly locate the self within the structures of consciousness, instead of the other way around.

Thus, a thinking subject is not the subject in relation to his or her own thinking, but instead an observer, who may know what contributes to his or her understanding and what does not, and can even try to assist it; nevertheless, the relationship between the human mind and understanding should be described in terms of *hope* rather than in terms of subject-object subordination.

## The Unnatural Nature of Consciousness

To characterize the main vector of contemporary investigations into consciousness, one can speak of the retention of a certain ‘privileged vocabulary’ (to use Richard Rorty’s phrase), particularly present in the scientific criteria for a satisfactory solution of the mind-body problem. The very structure of the current approach to this problem is pregnant with scientific methods and imperatives. It can be clearly seen in the descriptions of a productive connection between body and consciousness, in which the physical is responsible for the generation of the non-physical. For Mamardashvili, this approach cannot be satisfactory.

Implicit in the language of physics is the assumption that to describe some physical state or object means to provide as detailed a description as possible of all its relationships with other states and objects. But, if we accept that mental states cannot be equated with physical states and that they have a special ontological status, it would be reasonable to expect that the relationship between mind and body should differ from relations ordinarily addressed by science. The language of physics can describe the relationship between two tables, but not between a table and its mental image. The natural-scientific approach can describe relationships between objects, but consciousness of a thing is not, in and of itself, a thing.

This last statement is much less disputed today than it has been before, even in the recent past. It is generally accepted that, whereas physical reality has extension, mental reality has no such characteristics, and that, while physical objects possess a number of material characteristics (e.g. mass, weight, density, energy, etc.), mental events do not have the same parameters. The idea of an elephant does not evoke its appearance in our brain; tasting wine does not allow one to recover the traces of wine in our brain; and our memory of Jack’s singing yesterday is neither loud nor quiet, though his singing might have been. Current philosophy – and, it would appear, science itself as well – have come to realize that we can get very deep in investigating the neural changes that accompany mental states, but this does not mean that can access mental states themselves.

Mamardashvili notes that, in the majority of contemporary investigations, the connections between consciousness and objects are modeled on the connections *between objects*. The language of object-to-object relational descriptions is applied to everything else. If the basic relationship between physical



objects is a *causal* relationship, this must be the relationship inherent in our attempts to deal with the ‘mind–body’ problem, too, requiring us to explain how something that has no physical characteristics could be the cause of something that possesses such characteristics, and the other way around.

In other words, there is problem in showing how a non–physical event could result from physical processes that influence other physical processes. The problem is framed on the basis of experimental science, assuming that something must exist beyond the limits of consciousness before ascertaining the causal or functional connections between the conditioning and the conditioned. But if we admit that consciousness is not a thing, then what can give us reason to expect a connection between mind and body that would be anything like the relationships between two bodies? The pursuit of the physical grounds of consciousness is equivalent to such endeavors to uncover causal connections between the physical and the mental. In order to describe in what way consciousness is connected to the body within the natural-scientific framework, mind and body must belong to the same field of investigation, by virtue of sharing the same nature. This is an assumption that Mamardashvili rejects.

The application of causal descriptions to consciousness comes up against well–known difficulties, as the mental cannot influence the physical due to the closed nature of causal inferences in the physical world. Likewise, the physical cannot influence the mental, first of all due to the same reason and, second, because the same physical stimuli, for instance, are in no way guaranteed to produce identical mental events (as in our previous discussion of reading a proof of the Pythagorean Theorem). It may not be possible to think of an inference between the physical and the mental because the mechanism of causal inference contains the possibility of continuous conversion from one state to another while retaining the qualitative homogeneity of these states. Indeed, causality by definition tolerates no ontological breaks within itself (Leibniz’s principle, ‘*natura non facit saltum*’), and to infer a transfer from physical change to change of mental state would imply a certain short-circuit or a leap, which will remain experimentally irreproducible in principle. It is, for instance, impossible to demonstrate in continuity how water sampled in the mouth produces an experience of flavor. Our analysis would lead us from a change in the receptors in the mouth to changes in the neurons of the brain, but this brain state would not be identical with the subjective experiencing of the taste of the water, the consciousness of taste not being the taste itself.

Mamardashvili notes a curious situation – namely, that the majority of scholars do not assent to the naturalization of consciousness and that practically no one upholds its materiality, conceding the immateriality of thought and the special ontological status of the mental. And yet, as soon as one touches upon

investigative practice, one begins to treat consciousness as if it were a thing. This is generally unsurprising, since language obligatorily refers to things. Even pronouncing the word 'consciousness' all but forces one into a subject–predicate framework, complicating the discussion of method.

It is hard to deny, Mamardashvili proposes, that the *difference* between body and consciousness is not itself a material difference. In other words, the connection between consciousness and objects can only be described as *conceptual*, but not physical, chemical or biological. The problem is, however, that a conceptual difference remains a part of consciousness. Conceptual connections presuppose the existence of a consciousness that sets them, these connections, in place. Therefore, it may be more reasonable to enter a debate on consciousness in the language of consciousness itself, without resorting to the premises of physical experience. One cannot ignore the fact that all attempts to explain consciousness through anything other than itself (for instance, through the physical) are identified as 'non-consciousness' by consciousness itself. When we say that the brain produces consciousness, we cannot get away from the fact that this 'brain which produces my consciousness' exists *in* my consciousness: the experience of consciousness inevitably subsumes the objects and phenomena summoned to 'produce' consciousness. When we say, 'I am experiencing a feeling of fear', that 'fear' cannot be isolated, even logically, from the experience, or consciousness, of fear. We might be right, in the end, to say instead: 'My consciousness produces my brain which produces my consciousness'.

As we already know, Mamardashvili mentions another problem in this regard. One may object that the 'connection' does not need to be physical, and could be logical instead. This, however, turns up further difficulties. The subject–predicate model, or subject–object dualism, entails a series of complications. If we attempt to make consciousness an object, then something must exist that is conscious of that consciousness, which is thereby rendered into an object. If we accept the relation of 'consciousness' and the 'object of consciousness', then there must exist a third term, which would, in turn, make consciousness the object of consciousness. There are two possible paths we could pursue: either we must curtail this series arbitrarily, with the whole series plummeting into the realm of the unconscious as a result, or we concede to the infinite regress leading nowhere.

These ideas belong to the phenomenological tradition and are particularly present in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl who clearly saw the inapplicability of subject-object dualism to consciousness. He saw, too, that consciousness, which is conscious of objects, coincides with the consciousness thus objectified. Already within the framework of intentionality, one is dealing

with the existence of a certain inevitable intertwining of the perspective and the object upon which this perspective is directed – in other words, the inevitable enmeshment of the object of consciousness and of apprehending consciousness itself amounts to their original unity. In this manner, the phenomenological approach to consciousness leads to its being defined tautologically, in relation to the objects constitutive of the subject; against the canons of formal logic, it defines consciousness not by saying ‘consciousness is *x*’ but by proposing, ‘consciousness is *when ...*’ – ‘when there is an object of consciousness’.

In effect, Mamardashvili points out that a series of fundamental premises of science breaks down when applied to consciousness. If we approach consciousness as we approach the world of physical objects, it is difficult to evade some very obvious problems. It is impossible to establish the relational terms of a physical investigation between physical and non-physical experience. To register attendant brain changes is to deal in correlates which remains external to the lived experience of the subject. A mental state, as distinguished from a physical state, may not be related to any physical state whatsoever, since it lacks extension and substance and does not partake in causal chains of physical events.

The application of subject-object and genus-species patterns to consciousness leads immediately to logical paradoxes. This is connected with the fact that we try to gain access to consciousness through the very framework of logical categories, which is the fundamental attribute of consciousness itself. It is not clear, however, what meta-description might be available in this case. Further, consciousness itself appears as the only condition for the possibility of operating these categories. It is impossible to define consciousness in terms of subject-object or genus-species distinctions, not only because it is not an object or a species, nor a subject or a genus, but also because consciousness inevitably turns out to be ontologically prior to these and other distinctions. My consciousness is not an object for a very simple reason: I am, as it were, this consciousness. At the same time, references to ‘other minds’ prove to be useless, since each person only has the experience of his own consciousness, which mediates any possible experience of ‘other minds’. For that reason, consciousness, being a condition of the possibility of the objectivity of the external world, is not itself subject to objectification.

This amounts to a purely phenomenological method of problematizing consciousness, since we are dealing with passive and active synthesis (the thing which objectifies and the thing which is objectified), which is not entirely original in the intellectual context of the past century. Mamardashvili seems to think that philosophers of consciousness have to be interested in this active synthesis and its ‘mechanisms’ and processes. The situation is comparable to

a drama that happens not on the main stage but in the wings at best, if not entirely backstage. In the course of our attempts to objectify this drama, it dissolves into the terms 'mind' and 'body' and leaving us with the problem of their relatedness. The attempts to find out 'how consciousness works' bring alter the processes that otherwise transpire completely on their own – these attempts are comparable to trying to find out 'what things are like when I'm not there', or to my trying to see my body whole without the aid of a mirror. But just as the eye sees without seeing itself, so does the mind 'see' the world. Mamardashvili's approach can be characterized in this way: when a thinking subject attempts to devise a method for analyzing its parts to reveal the mechanisms, structures and processes of consciousness, it will discover nothing apart from what is found in the act of turning consciousness onto itself: emptiness. This is what consciousness encounters in the absence of objects. Further attempts to turn consciousness into a proper object of investigation result in the problems we have already discussed, such as the problem of causality.

There is, however, another motive that drives Mamardashvili to deny the applicability of causation to 'mental states'. It is connected with his belief in the human free will, and that a human being is free in his or her decisions and actions. But, where freedom is concerned, determinism can hardly apply. When a person makes a decision, he or she acts simultaneously as the object and the subject of the intended action, its source and its instrument. In this way, I have made a decision to write this book, and it is me who is writing it. It is also true that, in human life, we almost never encounter situations with only one possible course of action. Even in cases where a person seemingly has no choice, he can at least choose between performing an action and *refraining* from performing it. Doing and not doing something are logically simultaneous for a conscious subject. Intuitively, I can always separate the action that *I* perform from the action inflicted upon *me*.

To demonstrate this, we might appeal to the internal experience of consciousness, using the phenomenological method. If I were, then, to decide to enter a new restaurant, the causal status of that decision would be different from the case in which a mob of marketing agents attacked me in the street and, without giving me any time to think, pulled me into the restaurant against my will. In the latter case, the action inflicted upon me from the outside is aimed at me as a physical body, the entire situation consistent with physical determinism and causal laws. In other words, my body belongs to the causal metric of the world, whereas my consciousness does not. A cup may not choose whether it should fall to the floor when an irate person flings it down. That person, on the other hand, must inevitably find himself in the situation of choice and arbitrate between two symmetrical mental states: 'I am flinging down the

cup' and 'I am *not* flinging down the cup'. For these reasons, describing human conscious behavior in deterministic terms involves considerable difficulties.

We cannot establish a causal relationship between the physical and the mental. The mechanisms of causation involve *consecutive* and *continuous* transitions from initial to subsequent state, while preserving those states' qualitative homogeneity. But with mental states, the situation is exactly the opposite. When we taste the water, we cannot trace the continuity of water's transformation into the taste on our pallet. Changes in the taste receptors of the mouth will lead to changes in brain neurons, but the latter changes in the brain cannot be seen as identical to the sensation of taste. An awareness *of* something is not identical with that 'something'. Given that we do not have immediate access to mental states, the prospect of discussing causal mechanisms as applied to consciousness is not quite convincing. Causality, by definition, is something that contains no ontological gaps, but any attempt to conceive a transition from physical change to mental change would have to traverse just such a gap.

Mamardashvili intends to go further in stating that not only is consciousness *not* a product of physical conditions, it is not a product of any causes whatsoever. Consciousness defies causal description as such. It cannot be understood by means of cause-and-effect notions, and, therefore, constitutes a realm of reality to which no external cause can be attributed. This means that we cannot progressively develop any thought or understanding in such a way as to outline a step-by-step transition procedure from one mental state to another. We cannot show a certain thought to have occurred *of necessity*, as a physical event might have done – such as, for instance, nuclear decay after an impact. For Mamardashvili, the process of thinking is represented as a certain recurrent short circuit. Our ideas do not follow from the preceding speculation in a natural and discursive way, and, in this sense, our knowledge cannot be transferred to other persons. According to Mamardashvili, we can make nine steps towards another human's understanding, yet the tenth step must be made by that person herself. The principal difficulty here is that the tenth step does not follow from the preceding efforts; the final understanding may happen – or not. This allows Mamardashvili to say that, apart from the appearance of what are in fact illusory causes, thinking has a fundamentally extra-causal character.

This is another intuition of Mamardashvili's that runs contrary to the classical tradition and, in this case, to classical psychology – an approach that attributes to the operation of consciousness a causal mechanism that has the form of *associative* chains, so that the lineage of thoughts and images is thought to be traceable on the basis of resemblance or proximity. Mamardashvili does not deny this possibility, but he says that, while the associative principle is applicable to the operation of our psyche or mentality, consciousness cannot be

reduced to such mental activity alone. It is through the mechanism of association that the discrepancy between mental processes and the activity of consciousness may be demonstrated. To some extent, this principle can serve as a criterion for distinguishing consciousness from psyche: where associative activity is involved, we deal with routine mental states; where it is not present, we may witness 'flashes' of consciousness. This, of course, is a loose distinction, whose conscientious substantiation would require a complex system of philosophical and scientific proof – which, in the end, would be unlikely to yield a conclusive demonstration. Mamardashvili has no intention of tackling this thankless task. It is important for him, rather, to convey the intuition that mental activity is thinking activity responsible for the perception of scattered, variegated impressions. In this sense, there is little difference between the perception of humans as mental creatures and the perceptions of animals. Mentality alone does not permit us to subsume particulars under a universal. This is the work of consciousness.

In the chapter that follows, I will attempt to explain how Mamardashvili understood the process of gathering particulars under a universal. Yet first we need to show that, for Mamardashvili, there is a fundamental difference between mental processes and the processes of consciousness. He does not accept any account of consciousness as an aggregate of psychological states (memory, thinking, etc.). The unquestionable premise of classical empirical psychology – the thesis that consciousness functions as a mental process – is nothing more than a convenient, conventionally accepted abstraction for Mamardashvili. 'The reactivity of a human mind is one thing, but its elaboration by the human ... is another.'<sup>1</sup> What is, then, responsible for actualizing these states? How do they become possible? This is the work of the 'space of effort' (or the 'medium of effort'), says Mamardashvili, meaning that reference to proximate causes and driving factors would be useless here.

Consciousness partly specifies the space and direction of possible effort, yet the effort itself is not supported by external mechanisms, since it is not by any means actualized psychologically. An effort, as a state of consciousness, has another generating source.

This is the space of effort. To create something – anything at all, including anything in the spiritual sphere – certain work must be accomplished,

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<sup>1</sup> Merab Mamardashvili, 'The Necessity of Form' ['Обязательность формы'], *Voprosy filosofii*, 12, 1976, 136.

and work is always performed by ‘muscles’. We can, if we like, speak of the muscles of the soul or the muscles of the mind.<sup>2</sup>

The mind constructs linear chains of perceptions: some excitations engage others; the latter, in turn, engage the next wave; in general, there exists a certain mutually-preconditioned ensemble of sensations, where sensations can be explained through the impact of other sensations upon them. At the level of the mind, we might say that there is nothing unexpected in human mental states. If mentality behaves in a spontaneous way, we can doubt the mental health of its carrier. However, at the level of consciousness, we encounter an entirely different mechanism. Here, the states do not flow directly from one to another, for they are not governed by causal relations. In the previous chapter I have already said that, for Mamardashvili, the experience of consciousness is given as something fundamentally spontaneous (‘unheralded joy’, as he sometimes referred to it): we cannot say that understanding can occur in a vacuum, but neither does it occur as a result of a purposeful and deliberate action. We understand something, instead, simply because understanding comes to us. Mamardashvili often repeated that all genuinely significant events come about not ‘because’, but ‘despite’. The same rule applies to understanding: it also happens not ‘because’ but ‘despite’. The spontaneity of thought is inestimable in Mamardashvili’s view, and, strictly speaking, there are no clear, objective causes for consciousness.

Mamardashvili complements this speculation with something related to the phenomenon of *consciousness in general*, as opposed to the individual experience of consciousness. According to Mamardashvili, human consciousness itself, as a unique natural phenomenon, has no visible causes – at least not such causes as we could find in the natural world:

there is no natural self-sustaining mechanism encoded or preset in nature for the reproduction and implementation of specifically human relationships, longings, goals, actions, forms, etc. – in short, no such phenomenon whatsoever.<sup>3</sup>

Consciousness appears in nature as an artificial entity that can neither be derived from the properties found in nature nor be reduced to them. What does this mean? According to Mamardashvili, we have no satisfactory theory

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<sup>2</sup> Mamardashvili, *Consciousness and Civilization*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Mamardashvili, ‘The Necessity of Form’, 136.

to explain why such a wonderful quality as the ability to know oneself and to possess an interiority should exist in the world. 'Why is there consciousness?' is a question that any child can ask, but no adult can answer with certainty. There are theories of the divine origin of consciousness and of its evolutionary origin; there are attempts to explain human consciousness by reference to 'cosmic reason'; there are theories, according to which consciousness has no special preconditions – it just appeared in the course of the universe's development, but might just as well not have appeared at all. For Mamardashvili, none of these theories are satisfactory.

As for the divine or extraterrestrial origins of consciousness, these imaginings can hardly be tethered to a solid philosophical basis. The suggestion that 'consciousness appeared by chance' indicates our own difficulty with establishing firmer grounds: it is easier for us to waive any ambition of discovering them. Evolutionary theories, on the other hand, tend to make a favorable impression, since they tell us that consciousness constitutes an indispensable link in the evolution of the human species, because it allows solving certain categories of tasks that cannot be solved by an organism not possessed of consciousness. As a carrier of consciousness, the human can better oppose the uncertainties and hazards of the environment, is more adaptable and able to store complex experiences in memory, and learns to establish causal relations. Still, despite their credibility, evolutionary theories explain little with respect to the origin and nature of consciousness. We can imagine a situation in which a human being or some other creature is possessed of all the qualities just mentioned and yet remains unconscious of itself and has no interior experience.

Modern philosophy of consciousness actively employs the concept of a 'zombie', used in thought experiments wherein an individual's mental functioning is preserved but not accompanied with any internal 'record-keeping'. Mamardashvili never resorted to philosophical concepts like 'zombies', but indicated a similar possibility: the world could have been arranged in such a way as to be inhabited by creatures living the same lives as humans and capable of the same actions and activities, but utterly deprived of any internal light and staying in total cognitive darkness. Mamardashvili referred to such states as 'dreams': 'We can think – that is, perform logical operations – while staying in this unreality and never coming to reality. Logic alone cannot propel us onto the path of truth.'<sup>4</sup> If we can imagine a world where consciousness does not exist but all the events and processes, as well as the behaviors of their participants, are outwardly identical to the world where consciousness exists,

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4 Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path*, 11, 56.



it means that we do not have any clear explanation as to what consciousness is for and which causes engender its emergence. Are there any obvious factors that would oblige us to possess a consciousness? If, after some terrible catastrophe, nearly all the people on Earth became deprived of their consciousness of themselves, continuing to perform 'rational' actions like shaking hands when meeting, going to work, ordering taxis or playing computer games – would those few who had retained their consciousness ever notice the change around them? Mamardashvili referred to this social situation as 'St Vitus dance', writing:

This is a disease that causes all the limbs in the human body – legs, hands, everything intended for gesturing or motion – to move spontaneously, but in a certain order and in keeping with a certain rhythm. So, for example, a hand makes a gesture, then the other hand makes the same gesture, then a leg – ultimately, the living human body turns into an automatic self-propelled mechanism. ... And now imagine that a living human soul is situated within this mechanism as it performs these relentless motions. The soul does not want to do this at all, these movements are not occasioned by this soul's will – it just happens that there is a soul within this grinding mechanism. How it should suffer through the cycles of these forced movements! ... If we take this metaphor, expand it in time and assume that such a state can last not for five minutes but for an entire lifetime, expressing itself not as a disease, and be accompanied by continuous talking, feeling, etc. – this will be precisely the existential condition of 'St Vitus dance'.<sup>5</sup>

In general, we can only know of consciousness provided that we already have a consciousness. We cannot deduce it from our external environment nor identify it outside ourselves. It makes little sense, then, to ask about the causes of consciousness – at least, about the natural causes of its appearance, since consciousness is not rooted in nature – it is, instead, closer to a mistake of nature.

Man as such is not a product of Nature; man is not born the natural way. Once again, a human, or the humanity in a human, is something which is not born in the natural way and has no mechanism of natural birth. Further, one can put it as follows: the humanity in a human is something that cannot be caused or compelled – it is impossible to force anyone to

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<sup>5</sup> Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 16.

be a human, to cause the human within a man – that is, the very phenomenon of humanity, including thought (and the human as a carrier of thought), turns out to reside well outside the causal domain, though at the same time it is situated in it. In other words, the human is a creature fettered by the chain of causes and effects, and at the same time finds itself in some other place where properly human states are born within it, for which there is no natural mechanism. If man were born in a natural way, or the human in a human could be caused, if there were a natural mechanism for this, then there would have been no thought and no philosophy. To turn it around, philosophy or thought – the very necessity of thinking – exists because we are not born in a natural way.<sup>6</sup>

This allows Mamardashvili to conclude that the experience of consciousness is the experience of the so-called ‘already-consciousness’.

Mamardashvili uses the term ‘indivisibility’, indicating that, in the situation of understanding, you can only find yourself as having *already understood* something. An established thought is not only a kind of hermeneutical construction in which one can understand something only through an unconscious pre-understanding of the whole. This is also the result of already-completed thinking. We understand something only when the understanding is already complete: while in the process of understanding, we understand nothing yet. Understanding is achieved only upon complete constitution of the meaning of the whole, when the understanding of the whole is already there. This shifts us from the position of agency in understanding to that of witnessing. We do not create our understanding but merely come upon it, as if readymade.

Mamardashvili repeatedly expresses this hermeneutical idea that we can understand something only when we have already understood it, when the whole is already grasped. The passivity of understanding is also emphasized: I cannot transport myself, by deliberate effort, from the state of incomprehension to the state of understanding. Insight is not a product of the thinker’s personal effort. This doesn’t mean that nothing depends on us (if you never turn your attention to a particular question, it is unlikely that you will ever arrive at its solution). But the alchemy of the flashes of understanding is given to us only in the mode of observation and passive registration – I waited for understanding until it arrived. Thus, we can never be aware of ourselves in the process of coming to a thought, but only as already confronted by it.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 52–53.

This leads to one important conclusion. It turns out that no method or logical sequence of steps taken on the way to understanding should necessarily lead us towards the desired result. We can significantly increase the odds by persevering in the thinking process, but this does not amount to any guarantee. According to Mamardashvili, the work of consciousness is described as a kind of anticipatory phenomenology – the path of entry into thought must be from the outset a constitutive part of that thought as having already transpired. Until the thought has made its appearance, the path of our consciousness in its direction is but one of the many possibilities, none of which is guaranteed a predetermined result. Mamardashvili's philosophical approach amounts to a phenomenology of the event – that event being an unheralded and spontaneous encounter with understanding.

## Consciousness and Symbol

According to Mamardashvili, consciousness is neither a thing, nor a relation between things, nor a unique set of properties and qualities, nor a process – but is instead related to something that makes all the possibilities just listed possible. With this definition, consciousness appears to be a certain kind of ‘black box’: we can see its ‘input’ and ‘output’, but any attempt to describe its internal goings-on leads us into insoluble contradictions. Are we, then, to confine ourselves to describing consciousness solely in terms of relation? – or shall we have the courage to propose a definition of the form ‘consciousness is  $x$ ’? It turns out that Mamardashvili would choose the second path.

We have to start with some specifics: not only is the mind private, it is also ‘extra-spatial’ – which gives it a paradoxical ontological status. What kind of space does a thought occupy? Ontology is expropriated by things; how are, then, *non-things* given? The paradox is inherent in the word ‘nothing’. For Mamardashvili, it is its unique ontological status that accounts for the original mystery of consciousness: it *exists*, but it *is not a thing*. This peculiarity of consciousness makes it akin to *being*. Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology draws attention to the impossibility of speaking of being in terms of things and properties. When considering a piece of chalk, we cannot, no matter what we do, detect *being* within it – that is, detect something by virtue of which the thing exists and differs from an imaginary piece of chalk. Where is *being* hidden within a thing? An imaginary piece of chalk and an actual, existing piece of chalk differ in some way, but what is this something in which they differ? The difficulties in detecting this ‘something’ allow us to say that being *exists*, but it is not a *thing*. Mamardashvili agrees with this interpretation of being, adding that we can, and must, say the same thing about consciousness: that it exists, but it is not a thing. How are we to understand this? Here, Mamardashvili is adopting a skeptical point of view: a person can succeed in comprehending things in the objective world, extraneously located in relation to him or her; however, such comprehension can hardly amount to positive knowledge. So, must our knowledge of consciousness remain purely aphoristic?

The tradition of elusiveness with respect to consciousness, and of characterizing it as something that is never given but through which everything else is given, is a constant in philosophy. Since the time of Plato, philosophers have been discussing it, in one way or another, but pointing directly to consciousness in the hopes of securing it as an object of observation involves an elementary,

though not immediately obvious, logical inconsistency: how can we make an object out of something that enables us to objectify all other things? Kant, for example, maintained that the carrier of consciousness is always given to himself as a phenomenon rather than as normality. The subject is barred from access to the operation of consciousness in its transcendent depth: the subject deals instead with the results of already completed work. Consciousness proves to be ‘always at least one order higher than the order of the content constituting conscious experience’,<sup>1</sup> and, in this sense, it is forever elusive and cannot be grasped directly.

At the same time, though it defies direct perception, consciousness enables the perception of content. If these are our parameters of consciousness, Plato’s allegory of the Cave will represent not a direct but instead an *indirect* definition of consciousness, by means of comparison with *light*. Of course, it was not only Plato who, in his contemplations on the nature of consciousness, resorted to the metaphor of light. Descartes’ ‘light of reason’ and the medieval mystics’ assimilations of consciousness to light are enough to show that the metaphor is not at all unusual. In asking ‘Why does consciousness not occur in darkness?’, David Chalmers continues this line of juxtaposing consciousness and light. What meaning, then, can we ascribe to this metaphor? Which is the property of consciousness that makes us use the metaphor of light?

Mamardashvili thinks that it is in Plato’s allegory of the cave that we find the key to this question. Everything in this parable has deep symbolic meaning. To recall this parable, some people dwelling in an underground cave are chained there in such a way that they cannot move and must always face the wall in front of them. A fire burns in the cave, throwing light. Critically, that fire is located behind and above the prisoners’ heads, at a considerable distance from them. Mamardashvili points out that the location of the fire behind the prisoners and the fixed position of their heads can mean only one thing: that in our ordinary state, we cannot turn towards the light-source – toward consciousness – and look at it directly, in the same way that the things we do see turn out to be mere shadows. This consciousness-light that allows us to see things but cannot itself be seen directly, is always *behind* us – in other words, preceding us, possessing priority. It is always already in action, whereas we ourselves are encountering its effects or results.

The parable describes the people in the cave, who watch the shadows and take them for genuine and true objects, because they have never seen anything else. The shadows, though, result from the sophisticated structure of the cave,

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<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili, Pyatigorsky, 40.

which, as we have already understood, symbolizes the world and its relation to thinking and cognition. Between the fire and the chained prisoners, there is a raised walkway, along which people carry various things symbolizing ideas in existence. Those things cast shadows, which the prisoners take to be real physical objects and things that are given to us in sensory experience. Those 'things', though, are essentially fictitious. The parable tells us that the world we perceive and cognize in the modus of our ordinary (not specifically philosophical) attitude is a mere illusion. But then, it happens that one of the prisoners is freed and turns his head towards the source of light; this sudden change nearly blinds him, and he tries to return to his usual position, so as to look at what he can see comfortably. But, gradually, he becomes accustomed to the light and understands that he can now see something truer than what he had been seeing before he was freed; he tries to come closer to the light and then leaves the cave and sees the Sun, in whose light he sees real things (these are, of course, the ideas, which have real existence and are not illusory). At last, he understands that it is this light that is the source of true vision – knowledge. It is obvious that this lucky escapee must symbolize a philosopher who has exchanged his ordinary cognitive attitude for a genuinely philosophic outlook. It is no coincidence that almost all philosophers read Plato's brilliant allegory of the cave.

But why does Plato compare consciousness specifically to light? Mamardashvili believes that the metaphor is not merely occasional and that it has deep symbolical meaning. Indeed, the metaphor of light provides a most bright illustration of what we keep implying: like light, consciousness makes things visible (as shadows on the wall) but does not allow seeing itself as a thing (to turn one's head and see the source of light). In the more sophisticated language of philosophy, consciousness can be referred to as the transcendental condition of the possibility of consciousness of the world. This complex structure still needs clarification. Although metaphors and symbolic images are not always good for philosophy, sometimes they are indispensable: this happens in those specific instances when thought encounters its limit (as we will see further in this chapter). This arriving at the limit is, nevertheless, the result of a philosophical discussion of consciousness, bringing thought to the boundary of its domain. At a critical moment, philosophical discourse that had hitherto employed clear and evidential wordings, must start speaking in the language of elusive metaphors and symbols. It has to say, 'consciousness is like light', since we see everything in this light but cannot see the light itself.

Similarly, all things are given in being, whereas being is not given as a thing. In the same way, we perceive all objects through consciousness, yet cannot perceive consciousness as an object. The structures of consciousness are

transcendental; they are not given as objects or things, but everything else is objectified through them.

Actually, thinking in this case is something that appears before us, and (if we recall Plato's myth of the cave) it is a state in which vision sees itself, is capable of seeing itself – I am able to see myself seeing, or, to use an ancient metaphor, thinking is a light that illuminates itself. It is either present or not. It can only happen on its own accord – it is impossible to construct it piece by piece, building it up gradually, step by step, adding information to information – all this is impossible. (In addition, we are in the situation of Poincaré's creatures.) In order to express what I am talking about, to clearly imagine the mystery which remains a mystery, ancient people employed the metaphor of light that illuminates itself. It is some act coinciding with our state in which we see our own vision, illuminate our own light. It is either present or not, I repeat. In order to clarify what this 'present or not' means, I will quote an example from a Gospel (I'll quote it so that you could yourself think on these speculative truths). In the Gospel of Matthew there is a metaphor which appears in connection with the problem of understanding and the problem of light in approximately this context: if you do not see what you see, then how can you see what you don't see? As an example of something invisible to be seen we are given this explanation: if the salt has lost its flavor, with what shall it be salted?<sup>2</sup>

The metaphor, of course, is not the point; it simply illustrates something that is being considered speculatively. Mamardashvili is looking to express one principal thought: something that makes it possible for a human to exist, that is, to have the ability to think, understand and, consequently, to be possessed of consciousness – in other words, consciousness itself – lies beyond the boundaries of a human being. It is something that does not belong to him, yet makes him.

*Consciousness does not belong to the human, but the human belongs to consciousness:* this is the leitmotif of Mamardashvili's philosophy, which reveals him to be both a follower of classical Platonism and a consistent transcendentalist. Man neither owns nor orders his conscious acts. Of course, such speculations are somewhat conditional, since a person can 'govern' his conscious states by way of shifting her attention from solving a mathematical problem to, say, watching a film or reading a book. All that Mamardashvili needs to say is

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<sup>2</sup> Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 72–73.

that we cannot control the deepest mechanisms of our consciousness, whereas the more superficial mental states are quite controllable.

To reiterate, the human is a subject not in virtue of *governing* consciousness, but in virtue of *partaking* in it. Accordingly, we cannot *have* knowledge of what consciousness is, since this is not a traditional kind of knowledge, for we can neither express it in words nor demonstrate it. We can inhabit it as a state, yet it is almost impossible to express it. Here, Mamardashvili follows a certain line of the classical tradition, for this deep intuition appears at the same time with philosophy itself – with Plato at the latest: since we are ‘situated’ in consciousness, we have our normal mental apparatus of reflection amplified by the transcendental conditions of consciousness. We cannot explain what is ‘beautiful’, ‘good’, ‘just’ or ‘absolute’, nor can we explain ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘being’, etc. – even as we near the understanding of these things, which grows almost obvious, like mathematical or logical axioms.

As do axioms, these concepts prove to be very difficult to define; we can locate no genus for the concepts of the ‘absolute’ or of ‘time’, if we consider them as a species. On the other hand, the experience of time – just as the idea of the absolute or the categories of judgment – is universal. In the formula of light, we can now substitute the respective variables: everything is given in time, whereas time itself is not given; everything is given in space, whereas space itself is not given; everything is given in being, whereas being itself is not given. In philosophy, this provision has been repeated many times; its general form is that no *a priori* knowledge can be grasped under the aspect of genus-species relations, causal, illustrative and actual status of things. This is brought about by two peculiarities of such knowledge: (1) *it is finite* (there is no genus for ‘being’), and (2) *it cannot be otherwise* (‘time’ and ‘space’). We can imagine a different distribution of facts in the world, but we cannot imagine different forms for those facts, such as space, time or the laws of logic. Mamardashvili himself says the following in this regard:

There is no point in trying to answer the questions of why a human should think and perceive reality in terms of three-dimensional space, or why space is three-dimensional. We can only learn and demonstrate that the organization of human perception is arranged in such a way that space is three-dimensional; however, we cannot answer the question ‘why’. Because we do not have such a point from which we could take an external look at this perception. We can only see a fact, acknowledge it; however, we cannot explain where it comes from or deduce it in the mind’s eye. The difference between ‘what can be made’ and ‘what is made by itself’ looks like a mystery. There are some things that a human can make,



and there are some things that are made, in a way, by themselves. But how can we understand this? What is meant by this 'making'? 'To make', roughly speaking, means to assemble parts. An important thing should be understood here: if something can be made in one way, it can probably be made in a different way (simply by definition, according to how we define 'making'). Once something is made and we have made it so, this means that it could be made otherwise. But can we 'make up' differently, for instance, the acts of our perception, which arranges objects in a three-dimensional space? No, we cannot. Why? Because it is not ourselves who 'made' this perception, formed it from its parts; that is, we did not add information A to information B, nor subtracted one from the other, we did not do any such thing, step by step and part by part. That is not how it happened. Most often, it occurs in such a way that we can only say that it happened instantaneously, on its own.<sup>3</sup>

This applies to consciousness itself and to its carrier (the subject). The subject did not create itself, did not author its own consciousness and did not establish the laws of cognition; all this is given to a human in the *ex post facto* mode. A human is always given to him- or herself as some output or result whose origin is lost. The initial step is missing from this structure, although the second step, the third step, etc., are present. Yet, no matter how hard we may try to piece together the entire set, the initial element will always remain missing. This situation is comparable to a drama that forever begins in the second act. This is why consciousness, which illuminates the entire world, *is never itself present in the world*, though it provides for the presence of all things within it.

On the other hand, human self-awareness involves the reproduction of the procedure for constructing a human. According to Mamardashvili, a human being who wishes to know him- or herself, must reconstruct him- or herself from pieces. But since this process of assembly must necessarily omit the initial step or element, this problem is unlikely ever to find a solution. This circumstance, most probably, constitutes the deepest foundation of the religious intuition that a human being must be created by a supernatural force. The interpretation of consciousness through the metaphor of light may, in turn, provide us with additional reasons for thinking this. This happened to be true of Mamardashvili himself.

Now let us see how consciousness is related to *symbols*. This topic is related to the previous discussion in this chapter, but the mention of a 'symbol' in

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3 Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 65.

the context of consciousness may at first seem rather unusual. How is, then, the concept of a symbol connected with consciousness? What Mamardashvili is essentially proposing is a 'symbolic theory of consciousness', with the view that consciousness at its very foundations operates through symbols. Let us try to clarify the connection between consciousness and symbol in order to reconstruct Mamardashvili's reasoning. To this purpose, we will have to adopt a set of working assumptions, which will enable us to bring symbol and consciousness into proximity. We should note also that some of Mamardashvili's views concerning symbols will prove to be consistent with the popular concept of a 'symbol', while others will constitute an entirely new interpretation of the term.

The first assumption concerns the origin of the word 'symbol'. In Greek, this word meant 'to put together' or 'to connect'. In Ancient Greece, there was a custom for friends who were going to part to take some item (a statuette, an ornament or an inscribed tablet) and break it in two halves. Each friend would then keep one of these halves. After years of being apart, these friends or even their descendants, could recognize one another upon meeting, by putting together the two halves in their possession to form a whole – a *symbol*. Thus, a symbol expressed the possibility of restoring wholeness by connecting the pieces. The Greek meaning of the word contains the idea of fusing heterogeneous elements, and one of its essential functions is to connect – or, more precisely, to re-connect – *disconnected* parts.

Another working assumption we will adopt is that of the symbol's *indirect* mode of reference. This provision means that, since consciousness has a transcendent nature – or since it makes the world apparent while itself remaining obscure – we cannot perceive it directly. Consequently, since consciousness is always ahead of us in our attempts to grasp it (representing, as Mamardashvili puts it, an instance 'of a higher order'), 'we have no way of speaking about this higher order apart from speaking obliquely and symbolically'.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Wittgenstein believed that what we cannot speak of, we must pass over in silence, Mamardashvili appears prepared to add that we really have to remain silent, given that thought itself operates in the mode of *signs*, and its extremes cannot be denoted. (This is, in fact, the salt of Wittgenstein's idea: the transcendent cannot be expressed, or *denoted*, since, in order to make that possible, we would have to cross its limits in completing the genus by turning its extremes into a species, which is impossible.)

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4 Mamardashvili, Pyatigorsky, 41.

Mamardashvili believes that the *symbolic* is of assistance precisely here – in its capacity to allude without denoting, which may help bring us where we wish to be while bypassing signs and their mediating function. Consciousness itself does not stand in denotative or referential relations with things: ideas are not essentially signs for things – in actuality, an idea does not at all have the nature of a sign. (Mamardashvili follows Plato in this view, and would rather agree that objects are signs for the real things that are ideas. The ‘real’ cup is but a fictitious image: its purpose consists solely in referring us to the *eidós* of the ideal cup.) A sign refers to something directly, performing this function in such a way that the denoted object is predictably brought up by the sign. Thus, if the word ‘cup’ denotes a cup and someone asks, ‘Bring me a cup’, then we will be able to meet this request by bringing a cup. Symbols, on the other hand, refer to their contents indirectly and implicitly. We cannot bring up the content of a symbol as immediately as we would bring up the content of a sign, since symbols do not denote specific things. A symbol performs its transporting function in a way that is not wholly referential: it does not refer us from one to another, but, rather, allows the possibility of seeing the universal – an idea or a thought – within the particular.

From this groundwork that allows us to bring symbol and consciousness together, we will now proceed to symbols themselves. In order to see ‘what symbols have to do with it’, we must first understand how a symbol functions. Something of crucial importance here might seem trivial at first sight: a symbol performs the function of *connecting a part with the whole* – or, to put it more accurately, it fits the part in the whole and shows that every ‘something’ is in fact a part of some presumably existing whole. *It is this capacity of a symbol that determines the subsequent explanation of the operation of consciousness.* Consciousness is nothing but an act of individual perception (a specific mental experience) brought under a universal (an idea or thought).

If we look at it more closely, this turns out to be what we call *understanding*. *Understanding is the grasping of specific immediate perceptions as instances of the universal that goes beyond the particular.* Let us analyze a simple example. Suppose that we are reading a fairy-tale or a novel, or watching a film. What does it mean to *understand* what we read or see? Understanding occurs when we grasp what is expressed by the given work by attaining the idea that governs the text or the film, although it is never explicitly stated. If we are unable to fit what we have read or seen into the universal that goes beyond it, we say that we ‘don’t understand a thing’. For instance, we understand a novel when we grasp what it tells us about greatness, passion, the value of that little that we have in life, or the importance of caring for those whom we love. If I understand from a fairy-tale that good always conquers evil, it is not because the

fairy-tale says so – there may not be a single word about it, but I *understand* this all the same. How do I, then, grasp this idea? This calls for something like a spurt or a leap. Something needs to happen – something to which we are not exactly entitled: it requires a shift from direct perception to the perception of something that we do not see, from what is given to what is *not* given. In this process, our thought runs through multiple possibilities of ‘fit’, as we attempt to incorporate what is directly given into thousands of possible conceptual structures – but only a few of them will fit. A chip taken from a statue will fit with only one statue; a puzzle component will fit only one puzzle. Without the puzzle, one tiny puzzle-piece is meaningless, but, when connected with the rest of the picture, it can reveal its meaning. This is the level at which a symbol works. In order to ‘figure out’ to which ‘universal’ the content of our ‘particular’ film or novel might belong, we need to understand what this ‘particular’ stands for (what it *symbolizes*), and which idea is expressed by something that we encounter in direct experience. To understand this, we have to ‘puzzle out’ the symbols – entities that connect us to the universal ideas and meanings as expressed in the ‘particular’. For instance, Hamlet’s soliloquy ‘connects’ us to a certain dimension of meanings and ideas, and it does this symbolically.

A symbol, as we have already seen, brings us to an idea implicitly and indirectly. This is best explained by means of a parable. Suppose that we are asking a sage about how we should understand the Tao, or *Eidos*, or God, or the essence of being, etc. Our philosophical intuition tells us that there is considerable difficulty in discussing such subjects directly (it is such subjects of which Wittgenstein prudently recommends to keep silent). But we also know that a sage can oft be heard replying: ‘In order to explain what it is, I shall tell you a parable.’ Myths and parables are widespread in the structure of knowledge of archaic civilizations and non-Western cultures. In the Western European philosophical tradition, the idea of constructing a symbol as the sole adequate form of communicating the absolute belongs to Plato alone, although, before his time, this intellectual practice was intensively employed in Eastern philosophies. Mamardashvili always believed that this was not by chance. Since the Western European culture had placed a greater emphasis on signs and concepts, it tended to overlook the capacity of signs to ‘run idle’, failing to assist our understanding, and denoting something already ‘inherent’ in them.

But how, in comparison with this, does a parable work? It tells us what we need to be told *symbolically* – that is, implicitly and indirectly – creating an effect of understanding without relying on the classical subject-predicate or genus-species definitions such as ‘God is *x*’ or ‘Tao is *x*’. Such wordings are of no use when extreme matters are concerned, and this is why signs break down at the extremes of description. Other means of expression are needed, and

they come in the form of symbolic narrative. The absolute, the transcendent and the extreme cannot be expressed in concepts or conveyed by signs. Since we cannot understand them through concepts, we have to resort to a special technique for the construction of symbolic forms, which would help us reach the meaning of the extreme. As one example of such indirect symbolism, Mamardashvili invokes the 'symbolism of death'. Although death 'cannot be anyone's lived experience, though it exists', *the symbol* of death becomes a productive moment of conscious human life'.

It is becoming evident that much of what Mamardashvili says about the work of a symbol is laden by a hidden confrontation between symbol and sign. It is crucial for a symbolic theory of consciousness to emphasize the difference between thought conceived as a sign structure and thought as symbolic structure. For this reason, let us say a few words about the *differences between signs and symbols*. I shall here specify only those differences, which Mamardashvili himself employs in his analysis of the symbolic nature of consciousness.

First, it is a symbol that permits a simultaneous apprehension of a whole. Signs have no such privilege, as they merely refer us from one particular to another. Thus, for instance, a red traffic light corresponds to a command that we stop, and the green light, to a command that we move. We could hardly say that the signs produced by the traffic light permit us to grasp some whole beyond their limits. On the contrary, to make it possible to interpret one sign, another sign should be involved, and to interpret the second sign, a third one is required, etc. I must first of all understand that traffic lights are intended for traffic control, that their colors stand for commands, that their sequence is predetermined, etc.

In contrast, a symbol allows for instantaneous grasping of the meaning as a whole, and this is its primary advantage. If I know that a dove is a symbol of peace, I need no other signs to understand it. Although I need further signs in order to understand a sign, whereas no such requirement obtains with respect to symbols, the content or meaning of a symbol is much more 'concentrated', in comparison with the meaning of a sign. If we compare the behaviors of signs and symbols, we will have to note a curious thing: even the simplest symbol has a meaning that is expressed in narrative. For instance, the cross of Christianity is a symbol of death, resurrection, the human nature of Christ, the fulfillment of a covenant, etc. Signs, on the other hand, are single-valued: when the mark on the digital indicator of a gasoline tank drops below a certain level, we understand that we must fill the tank. Besides, we can say that a symbol always has meaning, whereas a freestanding sign (such as the letter 'A') can be said to have a *value*, but this is not equivalent to *meaning*.

Second – and this is something important to Mamardashvili himself – in symbols, the relationship of denotation is different from that inherent in signs. This difference was first described by Ferdinand de Saussure. A sign is an arbitrary thing: we could call a cup a ‘plate’, and a plate a ‘cup’, and nothing would substantively change. We would get accustomed to their new names and use them just as confidently as we did before this inversion. A *symbol* is not so arbitrary. For instance, a lion can be a symbol of might and a fox a symbol of cunning, but if we wished to re-distribute these symbolic roles and make a mouse a symbol of might and a dog a symbol of cunning, we could hardly hope to succeed. Practically, in all symbols, an object that symbolizes something is imbued with a *meaning* or a specific *image component*, in connection with which it is used as a symbol. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure writes that the arbitrariness of symbols is but relative, since a symbol is ‘not entirely arbitrary’:

They are not empty configurations. They show at least a vestige of natural connection between the signal and its signification. For instance, our symbol of justice, the scales, could hardly be replaced by a chariot.<sup>5</sup>

A symbol, then, is also a certain embodiment of the thing that it stands for.

Under what circumstances will this peculiarity become important? The difference between a sign and a symbol – or between sign representation and the symbolic representation of a thing – will be of the highest importance in dealing with sacred objects. For instance, it should be understood that a temple, a statue of a deity or an icon are sacred in themselves, instead of merely denoting something divine. For instance, it would be obvious to an Orthodox Christian that one cannot pray before a picture of an icon taken by a cell phone (as opposed to standing before an actual icon, at home or in a church). Pilgrims often travel long distances only to behold a sacred object, not content with mere images of that object in print or on the internet. These cases make evident that a very special method of representation is concerned: it is not sign representation but symbolic representation, in which the symbol itself contains something of the ‘denoted’ object (such as a modicum of the divine, which makes the object itself sacred).

This peculiarity of symbolism applies not solely to sacred objects but also to some of the more prosaic cases. When we enjoy art or even simply understand

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<sup>5</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *A Course of General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), 101.

something, it becomes a symbol – as against a sign – that connects us to the innermost idea involved in our appreciation. Can we say, for instance, that Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* 'denotes' something? If we are to adhere to the rhetoric of denotation, we may well find an answer to this question – for example, we may say that it denotes the enigma of the universe or the secret of feminine beauty. But we are more likely to say that these meanings are *symbolized* by the painting, rather than being *denoted* by it. To avoid the impression that this is a mere dispute over terminology, we need to make clear that in all cases when the thing by which some object is represented (*Mona Lisa's* smile, in our case) appears to be an *integral part* of what is represented, we are in the domain of the symbolic. If *Mona Lisa* were to wink at us from the portrait, we could hardly expect to agree that this must symbolize the mystery of being. (Conventional signs, such as a smile standing for one thing and a wink for something else, are beside the point here.) In contrast, we could easily imagine being told that, from now on, the phrase 'to the left' would mean 'to the right' and vice versa – and accepting this as we habitually accept the arbitrariness of signs.

Let us now explore how the concept of a symbol correlates with Mamardashvili's ideas about consciousness, and why these concepts should be connected. To appreciate what Mamardashvili proposes in this area of the philosophy of consciousness, we need to be in touch with several spheres of classic philosophy: (1) Plato's theory of ideas, (2) Kant's problem of the transcendental origin of categories and (3) the problem of meaning as presented in various twentieth-century philosophical currents.

To begin, let us recall how Plato introduces the realm of ideas and why he needs it at all. We know this famous problem of classical philosophy: experience presents itself in scattered and chaotic form and, if we did not know to what we should attribute our perceptions, we would never see any 'objects' apart from disparate spots of light and shadow. What do we see, then, when we use our sense of sight? For instance, here I am, looking at a reproduction of Botticelli's *Primavera* before my desk. What do my eyes actually see when they focus on the picture? A neurophysiologist studying the processes of visualization knows very well that the retina registers only spots of color and nothing else. Still, we can look at a picture and discern the boundaries of objects and figures. In the process of perception, our eyes see not bare shapes, but definite objects, arranged in such a way as if we knew beforehand just *what* we were supposed to 'see'. When we perceive an object – say, a reading lamp – we *perceive* it as a lamp while *seeing* nothing more than a collection of dots, such that nothing within our field of vision should enable us to draw boundaries between the lamp, the table on which the lamp stands, the picture hanging

behind the lamp, and so on, within the entire ensemble of visual 'pixels' that make up the content of what we see.

To put it more simply, it is not clear what it is that enables us to discern one thing from another in the way that we are accustomed to. Why do I unite the lampshade with the lamp's brass stand but not with the picture on the wall or the table? Why do I connect one edge of the desk with its other edge, and not with the leg of the bed standing nearby? Nothing indeed prevents us from merging the pixels perceived by the retina in an entirely different way. We could conceivably 'reshuffle' our world, so that it would contain completely different objects, under completely different names. For example, by merging the edge of the desk with the leg of the bed we would obtain an object *x*, which has never hitherto been encountered in our ontology. After all, our eyes see but dots and nothing more, the rest being a product of our imagination, whose sources and procedures were first investigated by Plato. He was indeed the first to note that, given the many possibilities of gathering disparate spots into objects, this work is done not arbitrarily but in accordance with some hidden governing logic.

The presence of a certain algorithm, rather than arbitrariness, in this work is demonstrated by the fact that different people synthesize the dots in a similar way: most people will see a lamp in the collection of pixels *x*, whereas in the group of pixels *y*, most people will recognize a picture. What could possibly be responsible for this unanimity in the perception of the world? Plato believed ideas – *eidei* – that allowed us to live in the world of objects and things rather than in the chaotic world of heterogeneous spots. It is the eidetic dimension of true substances that brings order to our sensible world. Differentiating between the illusory world (the world of hallucinating consciousness) from the true reality is only possible through the assumption of the existence of *real ideal objects (eidei)*; otherwise, every person would 'connect the dots' at his or her own discretion. In a way, the Platonic account is one of the few that explain why people should see the world in a consistent way, with such fantastic unanimity.

Not only do ideas allow us to structure our reality, they also make it possible to build it up towards some state of holistic completeness. For instance, in order to see some figure as 'a house', we have to employ this *build-up* procedure. If we were to rely solely on our sensory experience, we would see but very little – and that 'little' would be meaningless to boot. The possibility of seeing 'a house' in a specific image is conditioned by the capacity to 'walk around' it *mentally* in order to grasp it as a whole. Thus, ideas allow us not only to structure reality, but also to build it up to some holistic completeness. And, finally,



ideas explain how it becomes possible that we classify particular objects under general concepts.

For instance, we have all been exposed, as part of our experience, to many individual instances of cats and dogs. But what do we understand by the notion of a 'cat' or a 'dog'? The notion must certainly differ from any individual cat or dog. We will, most likely, say that an animal is a dog because it shares the common nature typical of all dogs. But if the notion of a 'dog' is to denote something, it should denote something that is not some specific dog but some kind of a universal 'dogness' that includes the variety of different predicates that may be encountered in a dog (such as properties of a red collie or a black schnauzer). Clearly, then, this universal 'dogness' – the whole under which the multifarious dogs, big and small, might be united into a common genus – did not appear on the first dog's birthday and will not die with the death of the last dog in the universe. (This was just a mental experiment – I do hope that the genus of dogs will go on existing forever!) Consequently, the concept of a 'dog' has no place in space or time – it is ideal, and thus eternal. The most important thing, though, is that it precedes our experience of perceiving real dogs, and it is this ideal notion of a dog that allows us to see a dog in different specific 'dogs'.

Now let us leave Plato and see how the same problem is addressed by Kant. (Of course, we can only dwell upon the concepts of great philosophers but briefly, to the extent needed to set Mamardashvili's own approach in relief.) In general, then, Kantian philosophy deals with the same problems: graspable phenomena appear, in our ontology, not chaotically, but through a strict and well-ordered operation of the transcendental apparatus consisting of *a priori* forms of perception and cognition. The contribution of Kantian philosophy is the solution to the major question regarding mechanisms of perception of objects. This solution consists in attributing the laws of perception (what Plato referred to as 'ideas') to the domain of the transcendental apparatus – in other words, to a set of rules and standards for the constitution of the world as experienced by the subject, this set of rules itself not belonging to the subject but determining the latter. From the Kantian point of view, we owe the way we perceive things to this transcendental apparatus – in other words, to our innate ability to organize collections of spots and signals in accordance with specific rules. We owe the uniformity of our perceptions to the same categorical apparatus, whose presence in consciousness is, according to Kant, the precondition of the more or less organized character of our experience, so that it does not amount to a cascade of incoherent sensations. Following this, we can demonstrate that in order to distinguish a lamp within a mass of scattered perceptions, the activity of all the elements of the categorical apparatus is

required: the object must be contextualized in time, space, the continuum of causal relations, modality, etc.

How are Plato's theory of ideas and Kantian transcendentalism related to what Mamardashvili would propose in relation to the same problem? It turns out that these relationships are quite direct and vital. If we adhere to the traditional philosophical idea that *to understand means to generalize*, and to do so in such a way that the generalization, in a certain sense, precedes that which is being understood, we will be able to understand at the very least the basic objectives of Mamardashvili's theory of consciousness. Further, Mamardashvili will attempt to show what kind of role *symbols* might play in the work of generalization. In this, Mamardashvili's position may be characterized as a form of Platonism, in which ideas possess symbolic (instead of notional) form; further, his position can at the same time be viewed as a type of transcendental philosophy, since symbols, as they appear in his views, are of categorical nature. In any case, what appears to be important for Mamardashvili is to show that consciousness actualizes its function of generalization not through signs and concepts but symbolically. Let us try to reconstruct the logic of his speculations.

The first thing that we should note is the *modeling or constructive* nature of a symbol. It is this property that discloses the transcendental nature of a symbol, as well as the fact that, essentially, a symbol may be represented as a structure of consciousness. What makes it possible, then, for a symbol to generalize? First of all, a symbol represents a certain external object, and it does this in the same way as a concept does – namely, it points to the most significant properties peculiar to the object. A symbol, meanwhile, differs from a concept. The difference consists, first and foremost, in their different ways of generalization. Let us recall how generalization is achieved under a concept. To follow the Platonic logic (and this is the logic followed by Mamardashvili himself), one should say that universal attributes precede the identification of the same within particulars, instead of hypostatizing from them. Thus, the concept of a 'dog' is not made up from the attributes of 'dogness' as found in a number of actual animals. On the contrary, if it is the attribute of 'dogness' that we wish to isolate, we should be able to distinguish it in the very first dog that we meet, without having to sort through all the multifarious dogs of different breeds and colors. Here, we will have to ignore all the other attributes of objects and disregard their peculiarities – and this is especially important if we wish to extract the general property and make it an object of analysis. We will have to equate the Great Dane and the Chihuahua and, after discarding some 'minor' differences between the two, declare both of them 'dogs'. Using this simple method, we will acquire the general (or 'generic', as logicians would say) notion of a 'dog'.

However – and this is the major deficiency of the conceptual procedure for isolating the general – the resulting concept will be quite empty and deficient in meaning. Logicians and philosophers undertake this consciously: this is a general notion, and it should be, to the highest extent, empty and void of meaning, for, if we wish to consider the loveliness of the small dog and the nobility of the large one, as well as their color, length of their hair, the size of their ears or their eye shape, we will never obtain any workable concept. In spite of the sacrifices that we make, the problem persists: it not quite clear how a real dog could be classified under a concept void of any particulars, when the real dog will be inevitably possessed of a number of properties irrelevant to the concept.

We have already mentioned that a symbol generalizes in a different way than a concept. How, then, does a symbol generalize? First of all, it represents a certain *model* or *pattern* for the constitution of individual objects (things). It determines the principle, according to which all individual objects will be constructed. A symbol ‘clones’ an individual object instead of hypostatizing its general attributes. The work of symbolization may be compared with making biscuits with the help of a cookie-cutter. A symbol also ‘molds’ a certain kind of universality that will be inherent in each individual object. For these objects, their universality will be the symbol. Thus, a symbol is the generalized idea, which unfolds into a universe of individual instantiations, imparting them with their final meaning by determining their form and essence. Thus, as far as a symbol is concerned, we are dealing with a different way of generalization. This type of generalization retains the individual properties of objects, which have to be discarded in the case of the formation of a concept.

In contrast with concepts, symbols incorporate all their instantiations in all their specific variety and richness. While the idea of the dog as a *concept* has the form of a description of a creature with four legs, two ears and a tail, the *symbol* of a dog will, inconceivably, embody the peculiarities of the Great Dane and the Chihuahua, as well as the peculiarities of all the intermediate breeds. This is made possible by virtue of the symbol’s being a sort of ‘blank form’ for generating all kinds of dogs: a pure blueprint or formula. In other words, a symbol acts as a law for constructing of all the particulars of the kind, since it incorporates a general pattern for the generation of the particular and, if necessary, is able to expand into a set of particular objects and phenomena.

We can clarify in what way this can be possible with reference to the speculations of the Russian philosopher Alexey Losev, who studied the nature of a symbol intensively and did much for the interpretation of symbols. Mamardashvili would rely on this groundwork in his own time. Losev writes:

Take a simple algebraic quadratic equation. For  $x$ , which is a term of such an equation, you may substitute any quantity, volume, content or thing. Still, the quadratic equation will remain true everywhere and in every case; its will generality accommodate any content. This is accomplished by virtue of the universality of mathematical concepts, which has a different form than the universality of the empty generic concepts of logic; it incorporates a law for obtaining any content and any individual thing – in other words, this universality is obtained not by abstraction from specific contents or specific things, but instead by means of establishing the typical behavior of these contents and things.<sup>6</sup>

What this means is that, with respect to a symbol, we can find the general principle for structuring things. A symbol is akin to a draft or a pattern – but it should not be thought of as a weak and feeble prototype: it is quite clear that the drawing of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Tower of Pisa itself will look different. The real tower is full of colors, which the drawing lacks. A symbol may well be constituted by the real, ‘flesh-and-blood’ Leaning Tower of Pisa – but such that, in miniature form, would provide a way for the creation of any other tower. A symbolic tower can be replicated, at any moment of time, in order to represent hundreds of other towers, since it will be a model for their construction. It should be noted that a symbol contains everything that we will encounter later down the road in real things. A symbol has a *holographic* nature, meaning that the particular incorporates all the features of the universal, whereas the universal incorporates all the features of the particular; that is why, within a symbol, we can find everything that corresponds to the universality beyond it.

What real example of a symbol can we give? A good example is a straight-line segment, as discussed by Losev:

Mathematics, as the most precise of all sciences, supplies the most perfect representations of a symbol ... Since the set of all real numbers, in accordance with the principal theory of mathematics, has the power of a continuum, and since a straight-line segment is nothing but a set of points corresponding to the set of all real numbers, we should admit that a finite straight-line segment, given this understanding, is a *symbol* of the

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<sup>6</sup> Alexey Losev, *The Problem of the Symbol and Realistic Art* [Проблема символа и реалистическое искусство] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1976), 63–64.

acquisition of the set of all real (i.e. all rational and irrational) numbers, or, more precisely, one of the *symbols of infinity*.<sup>7</sup>

What is meant here is that in the smallest segment of a straight line we actually encounter infinity – indeed, an arbitrarily small segment of a straight line contains not a finite but an infinite number of points (there is an infinity of points between the segment's two limiting points). On the other hand, a straight-line segment is not infinity itself, but a representation of it, a glimpse of it, or its *symbol*. A straight-line segment happens to function as a symbol because it *demonstrates that infinity exists*; it is a pure schematic or a formula of the infinity.

What is, then, the relation between symbol and consciousness? It turns out that the symbolic method of generalization is the best representation of the essence of thinking. To think means *to understand how something occurs by instantly grasping the essence*. That is why a human thought is capable of grasping general meanings in all kinds of meaningful expressions. Let us agree that if we assume that consciousness, while grasping things, associates them to concepts – which are the emptiest and the most void-of-significance entities – it would be difficult to explain, then, how we are able to recognize the *dog* in a real dog, given that our knowledge of the *dog* is limited to it having four legs and a tail. If we assume, on the other hand, that the identification of an object is connected with understanding the principle of 'grasping' all dogs, the solution of the problem becomes somewhat clearer. From now on, thinking should be concerned not with the way in which each particular object comes under the respective universal, but with the way in which, for each particular object, its respective structuring formula works. Usually, this is exactly what our thought does. According to Mamardashvili, consciousness practices the symbolic – as opposed to conceptual – method of generalization.

Two reservations are germane in this regard, the first one being that the symbolic approach to consciousness can have two possible interpretations – Platonic essentialism and Kantian transcendental 'conceptualism'. If we interpret consciousness in the symbolic manner, the parity of these two philosophical lines will be preserved regardless of whether we accept the Platonic or the transcendental version. In the context of essentialism, symbols will exist similarly to Platonic ideas – objectively and independently of consciousness. In the context of transcendental method, symbols will figure as mechanisms constituting the operation of consciousness. Since the difference is insignificant as

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 187.

long as we assume pre-suppositional nature of symbols – for, in the context of transcendentalism, symbols configure consciousness but do not belong to it, and thus, exist objectively in a way that satisfies essentialism – Mamardashvili made no specific remark on the differences in interpretation.

The second reservation refers to an important comparative-philosophical nuance in the understanding of ideas as such. If we were to ask whether Platonic ideas are essentially concepts or symbols, we would thereby find ourselves in the center of the latent polemics between West-European and Russian traditions of interpreting of the Platonic notion of idea. Several Russian philosophers have offered alternative accounts of ideas, as compared to the mainline West European interpretation. The fundamental difference of the two is that, according to the classical West-European interpretation of ideas, they are essentially abstract concepts, whereas Russian philosophers like Mamardashvili and Losev understand ideas to be essentially symbols (and therefore particulars).

Let us now consider the next distinctive feature of a symbol that accounts for its role in the operation of consciousness. This second distinctive feature is directly connected to the one just discussed – that is, the special manner of generalization pertaining to a symbol. If we were to ask what the difference might be between the operations of a symbol and of a concept at the level of consciousness, the answer would be that this difference is determined by the mode of perception employed in each case. According to Mamardashvili, only one such mode will be referred to as ‘consciousness’ proper; the other one will probably represent a ‘report’ or a ‘record’ of the work completed by consciousness. In Chapter 3, we already discussed the point that consciousness, in Mamardashvili’s view, is not considered to be a process taking place at the reflective level (or in self-awareness), but instead as a process that *precedes* any reflection. It would be more proper, then, to denote consciousness as a spontaneous and intuitive process, rather than a discursive or conceptual one. Reflection always occurs in terms of concepts; we do not know any other manner of reflection. Yet, if we assume that consciousness is not something that may be grasped and reflected upon, but rather something that happens always unconsciously and independently of our purposeful efforts, it turns out that consciousness must proceed in terms of *anything but concepts*. In terms of what, then, can it possibly proceed? In terms of symbols, says Mamardashvili.

We can test this proposition against some trivial examples. When we close the door of our apartment, make a telephone call, pour out tea or clear the table, all our actions occur automatically. We do not think of how we walk or sit down; nor do we think of how we talk (although our unthinking speech remains grammatically correct). We just do all these things. We become aware

of our actions directly and immediately, without analyzing them in advance or reviewing them. But that is exactly how a symbol works – or, rather, it is the availability of symbols as structures of consciousness that makes consciousness immediate and spontaneous. Losev, who also pointed out this feature, wrote:

When we read a book or write something down on a sheet of paper, we never think about the individual letters of the alphabet. Nor do we think of any separate words; and, when we speak or listen to fluent speech, when we play a musical instrument or when we see and hear actors playing their parts on the stage, we do not discern separate phrases, separate bars of musical notation or separate gestures of the actors. All these merge into a single and continuous stream of consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

And it is exactly the presence of symbols that allows this immediate grasping of the meanings, through images and intuitions instead of logical concepts. When we listen to Hamlet's soliloquy, it connects us to its meaning via a specific poetic image – not by means of a system of strict universal concepts. It is through the work of a symbol that we can explain how we are able to 'read' the meaning of a novel or 'see' something implicit in a painting but never directly depicted.

Indeed, if the understanding of meanings beyond our direct perception were always conceptual, their manner of delivery would be completely different from what it happens to be in actuality. Books, music, pictures and movies would have to 'represent themselves' in rather a strange manner – announcing themselves, for instance, as 'a novel about the good conquering all evil' or 'a ballet about love and hate' or 'a movie about the human pursuit of happiness'. But do we expect Hamlet to announce, as soon as he appears on stage, 'I am Hamlet, the symbol of a self-conscious hero who is in doubt as to making a crucial step because of its uncertain morality'? Of course not. We plunge into Shakespeare's poetry and understand what the figure of Hamlet *symbolizes*, our understanding not being conceptual but occurring immediately, imaginatively and spontaneously.

If we now connect the things just discussed with what we already know about the operation of consciousness as a fundamentally non-reflexive mechanism, it will become clear why Mamardashvili believes consciousness to proceed in terms of symbols and not concepts. According to Mamardashvili, consciousness is a process, which, in the case of humans, involves and is governed

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

by symbols, to the effect that the human inhabits a force-field generated by 'their lines of force'.<sup>9</sup> In this manner, a symbol comes to be regarded as something directly pertinent to consciousness. 'Symbols are the tools of our conscious life. They are real things proper to our consciousness, not just analogies or metaphors.'<sup>10</sup>

Now that we have clarified the significance of symbols in the structure of consciousness, we have to address the last of our intended questions. Earlier, I promised to discuss the relationship between *symbol* and *meaning* in Mamardashvili's philosophy. In speaking of Platonic and Kantian philosophies, we paid attention to *how we could generalize the objects of the natural world*. Plato and Kant explain how the mechanism of generalization allows us to see a lamp in a lamp and a picture in a picture. Meanwhile, the question arises, whether the same mechanism could be discovered in relation to *events in the realm of value* – or, to put it more simply, in relation to *value* itself. It is obvious that a natural event – for example, the way the curtains billow in the breeze or the pattern of the stones scattered on the seashore – does not represent, for a human being, the same value or meaning as events that involve human will and moral sense. Facts (in which only objects are involved) do not have a value, whereas actions (facts involving subjects) do possess value. We can ask, then, if there is a generalization procedure that would allow the generalization of individual value-related events (such as actions, judgments or feelings) in the same way as we generalize our purely physical experiences. If I, as we have already seen earlier, can discern a lamp within a collection of color spots and lines due to an idea, can I, then, discern an event of value within the chaos of other occurrences? This happens to be precisely what Mamardashvili suggested.

Scholars of Mamardashvili's works sometimes say that he had created *a phenomenology leaning towards psychology*. It is within this framework of psychological phenomenology that he introduces the new value of a symbol. Why does this new value appear? It is due to the fact that ideas such as that of a circle, a dog or a lamp do not help us solve the problem of selecting a just (in terms of value) attitude in life, for they are too abstract. On the other hand, the psychological and existential value of a symbol as is introduced by Mamardashvili allows us to solve such problems. In effect, Mamardashvili attempts to create a new essentialism or a new phenomenology pertinent to

9 Mamardashvili, 'The Problem of Consciousness and the Philosophical Vocation', 38.

10 Mamardashvili, 'How I Understand Philosophy', 82.



the evaluative dimension of human experience – a phenomenology relevant to the humanity within the human.

Let us provide an example in order to clarify the problem we are discussing. Let's suppose that there is some politician who intends to strengthen his state, make it powerful and independent, eliminate unemployment, increase production, construct new infrastructure and attempt to expand the livable space in the country by providing the necessary human, agrarian and natural resources. He proposes, too, to unite a great number of different ethnicities under the aegis of his state (by eliminating the characteristic cultural features of different ethnicities and their ways of life), and, in the event this proved impracticable, to eliminate those ethnicities as such. His program, it would appear, offers several positive proposals and appears to be governed by a desire to improve the lives of the citizens. It has, nevertheless, some suspect elements – such as eliminating social welfare programs. How can we decide whether this political program is acceptable or critically flawed? It might look austere – but do we have the heart to reject the good it has to offer? This program is, of course, not fictitious, but something that has been proposed historically, by none other than Adolf Hitler. To reveal this is to make clear that the proposed program can only be thought of as criminal, regardless of its 'positive aspects'. And yet, how would we have arrived at such a judgment in the absence of readymade historic valuations?

The problem set by Mamardashvili concerns events in the realm of value and the question of what permits us to categorize events like 'elimination of unemployment through the elimination of people' under the general category of 'crime against humanity'? What is it that makes us interpret the proposition just mentioned as unconditional evil instead of conditional improvement? Mamardashvili maintains that human consciousness has an inherent capacity for *value-oriented categorization of heterogeneous particulars under universals*. And the leading role here belongs, once again, to the symbol, understood in this case as an action *fulfilling the function of real meaning* for an entire class of events. All the familiar attributes of a symbol are preserved in this situation: understanding is given to us as a direct and immediate grasping of the essence, which is not something abstract and general, but something particular. Thus, the symbol that supplied the intrinsic meaning of the 'good' and the 'bad' done by Hitler was the Holocaust – a real event that unambiguously revealed the criminal nature of the politics pursued by this leader. From that point on, there could not be any shades of difference with respect to Hitler's actions: the abominable nature of his aspirations became a commonly known fact; but what helped realize it was the symbol of the Holocaust, which operated in the way appropriate to a symbol, by gathering together the scattered

bundles of events and revealing what was, in fact, essential in all of them. This was an example I myself decided to employ in explaining Mamardashvili's thought concerning symbols and, first and foremost, *symbol as a value-laden event or experience, which imparts meaning to all the other events of human life*. Mamardashvili himself, in his many lectures and speculations, constantly returns to the same topic: what is it that provides for the presence of meaning in a series of events, which, in totality, represent the outline of our lives? This issue is another key problem, which Mamardashvili addressed in his studies of symbols and consciousness.

Let us return to an example we have considered earlier. Suppose, once again, that we have been invited to watch a movie or read a novel whose protagonist, in several scenes, performs certain actions: in the first scene, he declares his love to his girlfriend; in the second, he finds out about a murder that has been committed; in the third, he prevails in a fight with some hooligans; in the fourth, he meets an old friend and, in the fifth, he comes home and goes to bed. What would we say after watching or reading this type of narrative? Most probably, we would say that we have *understood nothing*. Our perplexity will be exacerbated by the absence of coherence or conceptual unity. But it is not the perceived causation among events that makes us say that a narrative is intelligible or not: it is the presence or the absence of *meaning*. Coherence as such, meanwhile, is not necessarily *meaningful* coherence in all cases. In other words, providing for coherence does not mean providing for the availability of *meaning*, which does not coincide with coherence, though it needs the latter as its necessary but not sufficient condition.

Now that the problem of meaning has been formulated in its general form, let us apply it to something that may not traditionally be considered a problem of philosophy, but cannot be 'bracketed', as Mamardashvili believes, from philosophical investigation. Let us apply the problem of meaning, under conditions of coherence as a given, to *human life*. Could we not indeed represent a human life as an aggregate of interconnected events – of facts that follow and flow from one another yet do not make evident any hidden meaning that we might presuppose beneath these appearances? Does not our life, impartially considered, resemble the sequence of events in the narrative just described? We are born and go on being as we play, study, obtain a profession, fall in love, give birth to children, travel, entertain ourselves, communicate with one another, learn, teach, bring up children, and so on. No matter how exciting and full of events life might be, the difficulty just mentioned still persists: there may be coherence, but there is no principle of unity among all the events – no principle that would impart meaning to life.

Indeed, the life of a human being is a collection of scattered facts, whose unity and necessity is for us an object of considerable doubt. We ask ourselves questions: Why did this accident occur and not some other? Why did I meet this person and not another? Was it worthwhile saying and doing the things that I did? A person asks such questions because understanding and its effect, the mastery of meaning, are essential to her or him: this is one of the essential human needs and is an integral component of happiness. Further, we are also possessed with a feeling that there is a hidden reserve of opportunities yet to be encountered and taken advantage of, some other lines of destiny, other scenarios and ways of living – and this feeling can be quite disturbing. It is poignant to realize that life is but a result of chance akin to a game of cards, an outcome of a single card drawn from a whole deck, the bulk of which remains unexplored and may perhaps contain richer and more exciting possibilities never to be realized.

To avoid such feelings of discontent, people tend to ascribe to their world a modus of proceeding out of necessity rather than being driven by sheer chance: we wish to see our life as a unity that is not accidental, but, rather, the only narrative imaginable. This human desire is paradoxical: no matter what kind of life a person has – even if it happens to be unlucky, if not worse – it is essential to a person to know that this is indeed *his*, or *her* life – the one and only life that belongs to that person proper and no one else. We want to be sure that we have drawn our own and not someone else's ticket, since we would otherwise experience a pervasive and unbearable sense of contingency.

This implies that if we wish to live our life in a conscious way, we should bring it under some kind of unity that would impart a symbolic character to any significant events in our life. Our consciousness seeks to grasp the idea (and the sense of value) that would render our life meaningful, as a whole. What Mamardashvili wants to say is that consciousness, by virtue of its inherently symbolic form, permits us to apprehend our life as a whole even in our own lifetime, and when this indeed does occur, it marks the person's emergence out of darkness and arrival in the light of consciousness. From the moment when this takes place, all events happening to him or her will be found either consistent or inconsistent with his or her sense of the whole, but the sense of absurd randomness of life situations will at any rate release that person forever.

This was the principle that Mamardashvili was looking for: a principle that would allow us to experience life not as a meaningless (albeit coherent) narrative, but, if at all possible, as something akin to a work of art expressive of an idea or some kind of meaning. If we know the meaning of our own fate, we will be able to discern it in all its variations and to see the same idea play itself out in different situations. We can then remain calm, and the anxiety about the

fact that everything might have been different will leave us, since our life can actually be lived in a myriad different ways, but its central theme, unique to the individual, will emerge regardless of the accidental narrative details.

How can we achieve such an awareness? The way that Mamardashvili proposes to us can be summarized by his dicta, 'a human comes to himself from afar' and 'a human is a far-away creature'.<sup>11</sup> These two phrases suggest that throughout life, human consciousness establishes certain symbolic codes that act as the keys to the comprehension of what is happening around us. These symbols supply us with a chance of direct and immediate perception of the essences of events that transpire in our lives. Symbols serve as instruments that permit us to see any particular event as a glimpse of something whole, a universal that imparts its meaning to what is perceptible. When something happens to us, we experience corresponding emotions and receive impressions – but are these merely random? Mamardashvili believes that they are governed by the strict logic of symbolic forms innate to us. If I fall in love with a particular person – one person among many – this does not happen randomly but in accordance with a principle that is the symbol governing my experience.

To actualize the possibility of a 'breakthrough' towards meaning, we should try to discern what symbolic forms arise or become legible from our ordinary impressions – these may bring us closer to grasping the whole picture. In this way, our ultimate nature will be enabled to escape the authority of confused empirical facts, so that we would be able to see, as Mamardashvili, puts it, 'the true state of affairs' – the entirety of the canvas of life. From this position, consciousness embraces the world from the perspective of infinity, rising above the horizon of time.

The substantive work of consciousness consists in perceiving some principle behind seemingly random events. When this happens, we call it the extraction of experience from life, and this, according to Mamardashvili, is a major task of human existence. When speaking of it, Mamardashvili employs the metaphor of a 'telescope': we should try to see what we see 'from a distance', as a component of the whole – of the universal which governs the particular. How can we achieve such generality? How do we see the whole behind the scattered events that occur in our lives? A finite creature can hardly hope to view the whole: until the moment when it is complete, advancing towards meaning step by step is extremely difficult. For this reason, we will have to resort to a special strategy for revealing large things within the small and for identifying the universal in the particulars. When we cannot go the whole way,

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11 Mamardashvili, *The Psychological Topology of the Path*, II, 36.

we must extract the universal from the particulars around us, for consciousness allows us to know a lot of things that are not given directly, and it permits us to know what is germane without knowing all. What gives us access to such knowledge is the symbol. In being at the center of all the properties that we discussed earlier, it enables us to discern the whole within the parts. It is the symbol discernible through the chaos of scattered perceptions that reveals to us 'the genuine state of affairs'. When we piece fragments of events together and discover that we have formed a symbol, we know that we have recovered the whole we have been looking for.

How does this remarkable mechanism operate in practice? The procedure for entering the symbolic reality is rather simple: our impressions act as a guide in the field of symbols. Specifically, not all our impressions act in this way, but those that tend to recur and to make us anxious, prompting us to revisit them again and again, haunted by a sense of mystery. Such impressions carry some hidden information pertaining to the structure of our feelings and to the very essence of our life. And yet, decoding a symbol is not a simple task. In Mamardashvili's view, one can spend a whole lifetime deciphering the cryptograms of symbols governing the visible events. In spite of the actual difficulty of the task, the process itself is not very complex: all that consciousness has to do is to decode which symbol is hidden behind an impression, and to extract the experience – that is, to find the universal that constitutes the meaning of the event.

These overly abstract speculations will at once be filled with more understandable content if we consider the example given by Mamardashvili himself:

I will now refer again to an example from Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* – the famous scene of the narrator eating a madeleine – when the little cake suddenly permeates the narrator with a strange feeling, bringing back a world of reminiscences. And, keep in mind, those reminiscences have nothing to do with the taste of the madeleine itself. They are memories of certain states and events that occurred with our narrator in childhood. But the point is that these memories are gone. Where have they gone to? To the little cake, so as to reappear years later. It appears that some states that we might have previously failed to understand contain something else, some truth about us, which does not coincide with its material form.

The mechanism described above by Mamardashvili operates in the following way: the madeleine constitutes one part of a symbol, whereas its other part is the narrator's childhood or, more precisely, his childhood impressions. The madeleine becomes, for the narrator, a symbol of his childhood. Its shape's

symbolic form accompanies the hero throughout his life, and the taste of the cake, experienced anew, revives the impressions of the past, connecting them to the impressions of the present and forming the desired connection between the events of life – which, for that matter, is a *conscious* connection. The hero's childhood impressions did not occur by chance, and the taste of the cake, which he is experiencing now, is not random either. Though the events of his youth and the events of his mature age may seem quite arbitrary, the mood that he will plunge into at the critical moment will be the same. The sought-after *meaning* can be defined as the *basic impression* of being in the world, which I carry with me throughout my life, but which is originally formed in early childhood. This mood will pass, with time, into specific images, faces, tastes and other things, and it will form symbols.

Symbols, then, re-actualize that basic mood which determines the deep character of my being in the world. Why should that basic mood indicate to us our objective in life and the ultimate meaning of our fate? The reason is that, of all the kaleidoscopic variety of events and objects, a human being will see and feel the things that constitute the essence of his or her basic mood. Wherever we go and whatever happens to us, we 'bring our world with us'. This, in each instance, is the world formed by our innermost feelings. These are difficult to express in words – but symbols are not expressed conceptually; they are felt intuitively and intimately, just like impressions and images that wholly absorb us.

By proceeding from current impressions to the underlying universals, a person can, through symbols that hold his basic mood, reach the ontology – the structure of the world – that forms the unity of her or his existence. The grasping of this unity will necessarily elude conceptual and sign structures; instead, it will be given in the direct and immediately perceivable form of an impression. This impression will itself be the sought-after meaning, or else an *experience of meaning*. It will also be representative of the whole pattern of possible human impressions. In a 'folded' form, it will contain the entire range of human experience.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about this complex process is that the work for reconstruction of meaning-symbols is essentially philosophic work: in order to arrive at understanding, an ordinary consciousness will have to learn to philosophize. This is why Mamardashvili believed that philosophy is not alien to everyday life, and that everyday life itself always contains something philosophical. 'The philosopher's task in general is to engage with the particular events of his own consciousness. Yet he must engage with them as if they were a mirror of other things.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 689.

We have traveled a long way from the discussion of consciousness with which this chapter began. My only justification for this is that Mamardashvili himself traveled just as far and wide in his own pursuit of consciousness.

**PART 4**

*The Human and Society*







## The Moral, Political and Historic Aspects of the Human

Mamardashvili, a Kantian transcendental philosopher in his ethical convictions, was certain that without rationality it would be impossible to reach moral enlightenment. The philosopher very definitely connected consciousness (thought) and civilization. On the other hand, he expressed a distrust of pure rationality – reason alone, he believed, does not guarantee the moral purity of our actions. From his point of view, in order to catch sight of the non-identity of the ethical and the logical, one must turn to the analysis of how consciousness functions. Consciousness, or rather the experience of thinking, is a state of meaningful spontaneity.

As we have already seen in the preceding chapters, according to Mamardashvili, there is no such algorithm or sequential, step-by-step path in our minds that would necessarily lead us to the point of understanding. Just as it is with thinking, the determination to do or not to do something is not deduced from any set of premises. Mamardashvili seeks to establish a convergence between moral sense (Mamardashvili calls it *conscience*) and thought. Both are *indivisible*, or unified; neither can be represented as a chain of inferences (in reasoning) or of causes and effects (in the case of experience), unless it be merely *post factum*. ‘There is no natural (that is, non-artificial) causal chain of occurrences that would give rise to a human, including the engendering of thought within the human.’<sup>1</sup> And so, ‘sometimes or perhaps more often than not, we have nothing left to do but to receive this unheralded joy of thought.’<sup>2</sup> This suggests that dwelling in thought and in the ethical realm requires going beyond sequences of logical inference, and also beyond the natural and deterministic momentum of the world – what Mamardashvili calls the natural relations of events.

Let us now turn to Mamardashvili’s concept of political and historic forms, in order to understand how thinking breaks through the causal chains of the natural order, making ethical judgments possible. Mamardashvili denies the

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<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 95.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

possibility of an outright explanation of humanity as a product of nature. From his point of view, ‘the humanity within the human’

tends to reside well outside the causal domain, though at the same time it is situated in it. In other words, the human is a creature fettered by the chain of causes and effects, and at the same time finds itself in some other place where properly human states are born within it, for which there is no natural mechanism. If man were born in a natural way, or the human in a human could be caused, if there were a natural mechanism for this, then there would have been no thought and no philosophy. To turn it around, philosophy or thought – the very necessity of thinking – exists because we are not born in a natural way. Thus, in a sense, thought is an element of the organ through which humans are born; as a necessary element, thought partakes in the very birth of a human – of what we intuitively understand to be specific to the human. After all, we know that man is not simply an upright bipedal creature, etc. – we see something else specific to the human (we know it when we see it), although it is, of course, impossible to define it. What is specifically humane is what is brought forth on an unnatural, non-mechanistic and non-automatic basis, and what we call thought is a partaker of this birth.<sup>3</sup>

‘In effect, what I am saying is this: in order for us to begin thinking, something must take place within us that is not a natural phenomenon, not a phenomenon of nature as such.’<sup>4</sup>

The opposition of concepts like ‘the natural order’ (or ‘natural causality’) and ‘consciousness’ (as well as ‘the human as such’, ‘the historical’ and ‘the cultural’) is needed by Mamardashvili in order to show that a person is constituted by a special connection with the order of ideas and values that exceeds and goes beyond the person’s actual position in the world. In the simplest sense, we are talking about the ‘realm’ of ideals – of goodness, justice, truth and meaning – about which a person may have a stable intuition, but which are never revealed in the world in all its ‘evident’ completeness. Still, not only does a person have an idea of things that make no appearance in the empirical world (there is *good* in the empirical world, but no *absolute good*, and similarly no *absolute justice*, etc.), he or she is also guided by these ideals, adapting

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 52–53.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 70.

him- or herself to these principles and acting *as if* they were entirely real, even in the empirical world.

It is important, then, that we clarify our understanding of 'ideal' in this context.

We call an 'ideal' something that is an abstract thing, not fully realized, but hovering before our consciousness and guiding us. But also we have simply imperceptibly abandoned ideals, because regardless of whether we call them 'ideals' or not, ideals are what we call, or consider, or choose as an ideal. That is, they are what we imagine, although in this case we do not consider what we imagine to be real in the same way as a tree, a table, and a particular person are real; we have simply turned away from ideals because, irrespective of whether we call them 'ideals' or not, ideals are what we call, or consider, or choose as an ideal.<sup>5</sup>

Two motifs are essential here. In the first place, an ideal is not something transcendent, for it is something close to us, almost intimate, well understood and intuitively grasped, though not objectified as an external and observable thing. It is hidden, but hidden within ourselves. (This parallels the situation of 'the transcendental' in philosophy, which is *hidden within us*, as compared the transcendent, which is *hidden from us*.) Secondly, an ideal does not possess the force of external compulsion: it is not something that determines us, making us its passive vehicles. The paradox of the ideal is that we choose it as our ideal, we voluntarily seek to submit to it, but not as something that would coerce us to act in a certain way once we make this commitment. And the commitment itself is made freely.

Were not this really given within us, never could we have quibbled into existence such a legislation by any stretch of reason, much less have wheedled our will into the belief of its authority. This law alone it is, that convinces us of the independency of our every outward and foreign determinative, and, along with this, of the imputability of all our actions.<sup>6</sup>

The ideal is established anew in each instance and always after the fact – first I adhere to something, and only then do I recognize the action of the ideal in what I have done. Mamardashvili offers a certain formula: a person is a being

<sup>5</sup> Mamardashvili, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 342–43.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundary of Pure Reason*, trans. J. W. Semple (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1838), 27.

for whom *the ideal is real*. In subscribing to this, the philosopher asserts that to be a human person is to be a creature involved in the order of ideas and values that transcends and exceeds our immediately present situation. This ultimately means that to be a person is to be a cultured being.

Mamardashvili defines culture or civilization as *historic form*. Being a human person implies a capacity for acting as a historic being. Historicity in this case does not mean a series of events related by causal links, but precisely the opposite – a falling out of the limits of natural causation. History, from Mamardashvili's point of view, is not a series of causes and their effects, but represents an effort to reproduce some exemplary form. It is this participation, which is *super-natural* in the literal sense, which makes a person a cultured or civilized being.

Without involvement in historic form – that is, in the assimilation of cultural forms – a person is underdeveloped, which means that he or she presents an excellent subject for the manipulation of his or her consciousness. Of course, being involved in the cultural matrix does not cancel out a person's individual thinking and consciousness. In order for the cultural not to acquire the characteristics of the natural, a person needs to consciously affirm her or his cultural identity, and to do so critically. If the person merely reproduces cultural traditions and norms, unthinkingly, as if under the force of momentum, and without any hard-won critical conviction earned through doubt, then she or he but dwells in culture as one would in nature. Cultural norms become akin to natural instincts.

In this sense, Mamardashvili uses the concepts of 'culture' and 'historic form' in a very well-defined way. This is a consciously assumed program of values that effectively goes against the natural needs of a human. The requirement to follow a particular cultural norm or another often contradicts our immediate desires and impulses. But simply following this norm is not sufficient. To restrict one's natural desires, and to do so unconsciously, does not make one a cultural and social being. It takes independent effort, the work of taking on beliefs and principles, and the courage to question one's own judgment. Further, in some cases it may be necessary to understand these forms themselves and the conditions of their functioning, in order to go beyond their limits and to create new cultural and historic forms. In the absence of such an effort, the individual and the human community live under the dictates of the status quo, as objects of inevitable manipulation and slaves to external forces. Without effort, the living thought is degraded, and even existing cultural forms cease to be reproduced.

Mamardashvili understands by 'historic form' not the form of natural relations between people, but rather the artificial environment of their coexistence.

This may include interactions with those we do not know personally – for example, with the achievements of the previous generations. To be a cultural (or social) being means to have a lasting relationship with those outside of our immediately present community, whose past presence retains its value for us. Therefore, in claiming the significance of his or her judgment, the person must proceed from the idea of her or his co-existence with other people within the limits of the world. Speaking on behalf of the entire community, he or she assumes personal responsibility in terms of group belonging. What makes us responsible is abstract duty, not situational obligations to specific people.

Mamardashvili saw the nature of social evil in infantilism as ‘the undeveloped nature of social matter’. Explaining that historic achievement involves the retention and reproduction of a certain form, Mamardashvili is referring to an act that does not empirically go beyond the cause-and-effect series, although it goes beyond the natural sequence of events in terms of meaning. He distinguishes two types of actions: those that are governed by an empirical process, and those whose logic is determined by an order of ideas exceeding the empirical givens. Actions of the second type are responsible for retransmitting the historic form.

Mamardashvili does not give a definitive answer to the question of whether thinking can guarantee a solid moral basis for an action. At the same time, he emphasizes that in an environment where all the other pillars might be collapsing, the one thing we can rely on is the critical nature of our thought. It is thanks to him that we can understand what is ‘not right’ with thinking. To clarify this idea, let us turn, once again, to the concept of ‘historic form’, which deals with the dimensions of *law* and *civil society*. It is thought that connects us to the field of legal consciousness. How does the authority of law work? Law possesses a unique nature – it always applies to everyone. The right of another person is my right and, conversely, my right is the right of another. Similarly, the infringement of the rights of one person simultaneously means the infringement of the rights of another. If someone is subjected to an illegal arrest, it means that each of us, represented by this person, was illegally repressed. A violation of the rights of one child means a violation of the rights of all children; an illegal seizure of property from one district resident means a violation of the property rights of all the residents; a threatened unjustified closure of one educational institution entails the threat of closure of all other educational institutions.

Law has a unique nature of original universality, since its alienation from one member of a group automatically applies to all members. It is this mechanism that underlies the ideas and practices of civil society – or ‘civilized society’, to use Mamardashvili’s own phrase. In such societies, individual violations

of rights are usually met with violent public protest, precisely because they are perceived in their generalized meaning. By contrast, in an uncivilized society, people do not see a connection between their 'rights' and the 'rights' of another. Effectively, this means that no one has any rights at all, and people interact instead according to the logic of self-interest, mutual benefit and submission to force. In contrast, within a legal framework there exists a strictly formal interest – that of respect for the rights of everyone, in accordance with a uniform (as opposed to selective) application of laws. In contrast with civilized, legal society, in a non-legal society natural and heterogeneous interests lead to the selective application of the law. But this type of society is not a uniform society of citizens: it is, in Mamardashvili's words, a simple aggregate founded upon nothing more than 'the contact of physical bodies'. This can assume different forms, including totalitarianism. In conversation with Bernard Murchland, Mamardashvili observed: 'A state without citizens is monstrous. It is ruinous. This leads to the worst kind of political corruption, to unlimited manipulation of people.'<sup>7</sup>

If the idea of the inviolability of natural human rights fails to emerge, no social life can be possible, and natural laws will operate as before. Mamardashvili emphasizes:

A simple mechanical or natural constellation or communal life of people turns into society only through connectedness of this kind. Civil society is, of course, not society in general, and not a society apart from other societies, but a certain quality of the society. It is not the entire society, but society brought to a certain state – the state of a figure that exists while the movement that traces it continues – the movement of human effort, the effort of many individuals who are in the state of this effort. Remove that effort and civil society will disappear. Take the Greeks: the effort disappeared and Greek society disappeared even before it was crushed by the barbarians.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to understand that a 'natural' society may well build within itself variants of 'natural' interaction, which will be characterized, for the most part, by natural or semi-natural proximity, reminiscent of ancestral ties in

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Murchland, 'The Mind of Mamardashvili', occasional paper of the Kettering Foundation (Washington: Kettering Foundation, 1991), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Merab Mamardashvili, *On Civil Society*, trans. Julia Sushitskaya and Alisa Slaughter, *A Spy for an Unknown Country. Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2020), 202-203.

traditional societies. Ethical relationships between people will be regulated by assessments such as 'good or bad' or 'us or them'. If the others are 'good' or if they belong with 'our own', then they should not be mistreated (subjected to violence in prison, for example). But this type of relationship cannot rise to generally valid political judgments ('no one should be treated violently while imprisoned').

According to Mamardashvili, we acquire our rights through the rights granted to others, just as we are 'freed' through the freedom recognized in others. At the same time, the protection of one's rights and freedoms always signifies the protection of the rights and freedoms of the other. This is the basis of the universal civil community of free individuals. In turn, according to Mamardashvili, it involves the human and not animal intersubjectivity, with the productive universality of judgment; in general, no encounter with the other is possible directly – that is, within the natural dimension. In its natural form, it occurs only as an encounter between one physical body and another. On the contrary, in civilized and cultured forms of social life, the encounter is made possible through the addition of an 'artificial organ' common to all – the sense of 'historic form' that ensures citizenship-like relations and, in fact, the very establishment of the citizen. Mamardashvili speaks about this as follows: in normally developed societies, the prevalence of artificial form is generally typical; they are in complex interactions with secondary, elementary forms, but nonetheless there is a tendency (which exacts a high price in terms of human sacrifice, passions, and struggle) for society as a whole to be regulated more or less by a core of artificial and cultural forms. But the natural forms do not disappear as a result, they continue to exist and, apparently, will always go on existing.

Mamardashvili assumes that when a society is constructed only horizontally, we actually get a totalitarian state, which is built on reductionist social situations. The artificial forms collapse, and only the elementary ones remain. The natural form (Mamardashvili calls it 'elementary') is opposed to the artificial ideal form responsible for political phenomena such as democracy. Elementary forms of sociality, when left to themselves, engender what Mamardashvili referred to as 'zombies'. Reduced to their natural basis, they cannot treat the others, nor even themselves, as citizens, since they have never thought within the legal framework of universality. 'Zombies' simply do not understand how it is possible to evaluate events in the world as commonly significant. It is extremely difficult for such a being to understand the idea that violence against another is violence against him- or herself. Mamardashvili poses a question: 'Why do we need history?' He answers it himself: 'Time is effort – the effort of being.' We are given time – both personal and historic



time – to mature as individuals and citizens, so that our actions can become the basis of a connectedness that we call ‘civil society’.<sup>9</sup> There are no other, exterior paths to achieving this. Neither the President nor the Prime Minister can legislate or achieve this on our behalf. Mamardashvili considers the ‘drama of the soul’ in the spirit of Dostoevsky, as the play of ‘historic forces within the human’:

What appears to be social reactions, social roles, masks and so on, is in reality the drama of the soul ... and implies the movement in the soul to counterbalance what is developing on the outside. So the labor of the soul and of freedom is, in fact, history.<sup>10</sup>

What role does thinking play here? It provides a link between the pragmatic (the real) and the ideal. At the same time, it does not just align the individual and the universal (this alignment realized, for example, within the market, arranged as a horizontal type of interaction, where supply and demand result, on balance, in equilibrium prices that reconcile the interests of buyers and sellers). Rather, it combines and reconciles the natural with the super-natural, the sensory with the speculative, the real with the ideal. This is one of the fundamental functions of thought, traditionally attributed to it by philosophers since Plato, who first discovered the capacity of thought to ‘mediate between worlds’ – and to make the ideal real.

Mamardashvili’s answer will be that the very nature of thinking associated with moral feeling must be devoid of *finality* and free of the momentum of the *status quo*. Genuine thinking, and not its surrogate, is always fraught with difficulty in the absence of ready-made solutions. This is due to the freedom inherent in the moral act. It is possible only under the conditions of genuine uncertainty of choice – in instances when you can just as freely choose evil as the good. From many philosophical contexts, we know that only in cases that involve a real possibility of evil does the good remain the good, without being devalued. But the same requirement applies to thinking itself – it must happen without coercion. Mamardashvili observes that people often say

how great it would be if there were some mechanism that made people good. For instance, if science could invent a medication that, when taken by people, would give rise to a special state that might be called

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

benevolence, towards everyone and everything ... that is, a mechanism would be launched that did not require my participation, and that delivered social harmony without my participation, without my 'fear and trembling'.<sup>11</sup>

'Imagine that you take a medication, and through this medication something happens in you; and what has happened, if it did happen in this way, does not make the slightest sense to you.'<sup>12</sup> There can be no automatism in genuine thinking, and this is what makes it related to the moral sense, for any guarantee of an encounter between the intellectual and the moral would render the whole enterprise meaningless. Mamardashvili speaks about this as follows:

The good is something that needs to be done deliberately in every instance, whereas evil is something that happens by itself. And conscience in particular possesses a very strange property – it is such that when I hold on to my conscience – that is, when I am conscientious – it turns out as though I were accomplishing an act of conscience in the world for the first time and for everyone, despite the fact that it has been accomplished millions of times. Yet I must repeat that if it is conscience, then it is performed by me as if for the first time and for everyone, for all mankind, because I cannot ... take advantage of what has been done by others ... It is impossible to accumulate understanding, and similarly you cannot accumulate conscience.<sup>13</sup>

Thinking, as a capacity for judgment, should consist, from this point of view, in the ability to make a decision without consulting ready-made answers or criteria. We should not stop thinking, not only when key signposts are absent, but also when certain standards have *already* been developed. Mamardashvili's formula consists in the idea that thought as such is *a continuity of thinking*. It is necessary to unsettle, again and again, meanings previously thought settled, and to keep them in suspense.

This is similar to Mamardashvili's idea about the need to act morally today while taking advantage of yesterday's moral victory tomorrow. The resources of goodness cannot be accumulated (just as the resources of understanding cannot). Understanding is, by definition, a here-and-now understanding. But moral sense is likewise experienced in the here-and-now, as if always for the

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11 Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 49.

12 *Ibid.*, 50.

13 *Ibid.*, 49.

first time. Mamardashvili has this to say on the subject: ‘Who is the one saying, “show me goodness, and then I’ll be good”? The person who finds this reasoning appropriate, does not think.’ And further, ‘not only is there no natural mechanism for goodness, but even if there were such a mechanism, it would be of no value.’<sup>14</sup>

In the social and political spheres, progress can only be realized through events – when personality has been established and takes upon itself its own responsibility; but if ‘a person renounces the effort and the risk, then the social machinery will not bring him happiness’. History, therefore, ‘is fulfilled only through events’. The human ‘commences history through these historical acts’. ‘History does not flow on its own.’<sup>15</sup> Otherwise, there arises a situation of irresponsibility and by now nothing is called by its own name, and before us looms ‘something obscure, and generally quite loathsome, which has no name’. Only upon the emergence of a generation of independent people capable of real social and political action can the world be kept from chaos and barbarism. It was thanks to such a generation, Mamardashvili emphasizes, that Christianity itself emerged when it did.<sup>16</sup>

To return from the idea of spontaneity to the idea of the universality and ideality of historic and political forms, as well as the authority of law, it appears that the labor of thought is concerned with reconnecting us, each time anew, to this cultural, historic and political framework. Immersion in the sublime does not arrive by any guarantee. To Mamardashvili himself,

the trouble and the drama of human existence consist in the fact that everything is monstrously concrete, that nothing ever follows any rules and norms, although there are always rules and norms. No situation where I have to act, say, nobly, kindly, or to act wickedly, dishonestly, and so on, can represent a consequence ensuing from the application of a rule.<sup>17</sup>

To recognize the forms of law, ethical imperative, or cultural framework requires unflinching attention, and the doubt factor will always be an essential ingredient of this process. Adhering to high principles without continuing to think is impossible. We perceive this intuitively, even at the level of formulae.

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14 Ibid., 5.

15 Merab Mamardashvili, *An Essay In Physical Metaphysics* [Опыт физической метафизики] (Moscow: Mamardashvili Foundation, 2009), 172–73.

16 Ibid.

17 Mamardashvili, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 241.

We sense the automation of culture to be something paradoxical, since we would generally associate automatism with the absence of culture as such. For example, we believe that a truly cultured person is always uncertain with regard to his or her own culture. If belonging to a particular cultural-historic form becomes sacralized but completely non-reflexive, turning into an uncritical formula of compliance in which thought remains untapped, that form will cease to fulfill the sense of form as an ideal dimension. It becomes a simple fact, subject to naturalistic determination. This is what prescriptions and prohibitions look like in traditional societies, totalitarian societies, and so on.

Conscience is not a phenomenon of the same order as separate empirical, specific, moral and normative phenomena, when a person acts in accordance with norms, and a norm is the cause or the basis of an act.<sup>18</sup>

The requirement of the continuous flow of thinking is connected with the fact that the ideal apparently being 'realized' must still remain *ideal*. But thinking stopped in its tracks tends to lose sight of ideality. If something is simply real, it is included in the natural order of things. In contrast, to hold the ideal as real requires the continuous effort of thinking. The ideal is not an objective image that I could maintain unthinkingly or worship blindly as a transcendent deity. Strictly speaking, I choose the ideal as an ideal, I choose to adhere to it, and I remain a thinking being active in this choice.

Herein lies the paradoxical nature of the ideal: it is not an external and compulsory law, to which I must passively submit. I myself must endow the ideal with ideality, I myself must place the law on its pedestal. It is important to understand that not only do I have to do this again and again, but every moral act must necessarily precede this re-establishing. Otherwise, we will lose our freedom, which is also our potential for moral action. If I were to reason, 'now I will act morally, because there is such an ideal or law (as written in the Scripture, as subscribed to by my ancestors, etc.)', this reasoning would be devoid of value. It is necessary first to commit an act, and only then, secondarily or 'retroactively', to recognize in it the action of the ideal. The ideal, in other words, cannot compel me; it must be elected by me, freely and anew, as my ideal. It is especially for this reason that the work of 'unabated thought' is necessary. When I do not test my historic framework for strength by subjecting it to criticism, I stop corresponding to it and once again fall out of it.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 343.

## Consciousness and Civilization

Let us consider the speculation that can be confidently termed a ‘tuning-fork’ for the rest of Mamardashvili’s philosophy:

My whole ‘theory’ of consciousness can be reduced to a single germ of early experience, to the primeval impression of a meeting point of the civilization, on the one hand, and of the backwoods life, on the other hand. I felt that my attempts to remain human in that situation were grotesque and ridiculous. The fundamentals of civilization were undermined so much that it was impossible to uncover our own maladies, to discuss them or to think them over. And the less we could uncover them, the more they – left deep inside – rooted themselves within us, so that we got close to being entirely overcome with hidden, imperceptible decay due to the fact that civilization was perishing, that there was no Agora.<sup>1</sup>

These words represent the leitmotif of Mamardashvili’s entire intellectual achievement with respect to the study of consciousness. It is very important to understand that his interest in the problem of consciousness had never been purely speculative, and was never limited to solving sophisticated philosophical ‘puzzles’ that inevitably accompany any studies in consciousness. The greatest intellectual stimulus, for Mamardashvili, consisted in attempts to understand how one could live the good life – the *civilized* life – and whether such a life was possible in Russia. Philosophical language and reflection were but instrumental in this context. Mamardashvili believed that any significant and productive philosophical endeavor had to be inspired by the task of discovering the good – and, hence, the intelligible and well-ordered values (as experienced consciously) – understood to be the condition of human existence.

Further, it appears that these very convictions account for the success of his philosophy in Russia. If we were to approach Mamardashvili’s philosophy with stringent standards of heuristic and philosophical originality, we might find ourselves somewhat disappointed, since generally Mamardashvili neither constructed comprehensive theories nor provided specific solutions nor offered clear-cut positions and arguments. And yet, if we realize that it is not

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<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili, *Consciousness and Civilization*, 24–25.

solely the interest towards philosophical problems that is at the back of the intellectual worlds created by Mamardashvili, but rather a quest for clarity in what it means to live a good life, we will be able to understand the considerable interest aroused by his philosophy in Russia. Solutions to the problems of life that appear so vital in our own country may not seem so urgent to a Western reader. The West has already gone through the actual human experience of consciousness-molding (which, according to Mamardashvili, provides a basis for civilization) – or, at least, has commenced going through it; whereas for our country, this whole experience still lies ahead. This is why I am here presenting ‘in conclusion’ what would have been presented in the ‘introduction’ if aimed at the Russian audience. But let me clarify what I mean.

Mamardashvili argued that social, economic, and moral interests begin to mean something to a person only after they acquire ‘symbolic power’. Interests must adhere to certain symbols, ‘which, like an atomic nucleus, can unleash massive energy’. It is here that interests are transformed into *values*. Cultural norms do not possess fateful historic significance until they turn into highly charged symbols in a specific social situation, until the ‘symbolic protoplasm’<sup>2</sup> develops, so that everything becomes an element of history. Mamardashvili uses various metaphors in reference to the ideological field that governs people – speaking of ‘black holes’ that entire peoples and vast territories can fall into, or ‘radiation sickness’, etc. But all of them have one general meaning, which he attempted to reveal in ‘Consciousness and Civilization’. According to Mamardashvili, we still live today as distant heirs to this ‘radiation disease’. In this analysis, two basic concepts are actually used – those of civilization and its opposite, barbarism. In this case, Mamardashvili identifies civilization with culture. Barbarism is precisely a lack of culture, a lack of spirituality, and if we take modernity, beginning with the twentieth century – the transformation of a human into a zombie, which is more terrible than original barbarism, since it loses some of the basic characteristics of the human as *homo sapiens*.

According to Mamardashvili (although we have not yet mentioned this), consciousness, together with the fact of its employment, is the precondition of *the existence of civilization or civilized human life*. If human consciousness is active and being made use of, it means that its possessor lives *consciously* and therefore consistently with human nature. This is why, in order to discover the good life – which is, actually, civilized human life, as opposed to a life that is barbarian, wild or bestial – a person must understand what consciousness is and what it is not. It is on this plane that Mamardashvili’s interest in the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

problems of consciousness lies. However, given the triviality of this consideration, the understanding of what consciousness is and how it should be used is not as obvious as it may seem at first.

Mamardashvili undertakes the task of demonstrating the principal difficulties that may hinder such understanding, and of clarifying the means by which true consciousness can be distinguished from its fictitious renderings. With this in mind, there are *two* essential features of genuine consciousness or, to put it differently, criteria for determining whether a person is conscious – in other words, awake as opposed to sleeping. The first of these conditions consists in identifying oneself in the world as an active subject, capable of changing and redirecting chains of events. What is meant here is being in the world, not as a fact among other facts (since a human being is not a fact), but instead as someone who gives meaning to facts, not according to the logic of facts themselves, but according to a certain otherworldly, non-factual logic, which is never explicitly present in the everyday world. A human can be deemed *conscious* when she or he has confidence in the autonomy of her or his thought and of her or his knowledge of how one should act – often in spite of the actual circumstances. This is a feeling of a certain internal reference point, which draws its force from a source other than the external order of things; in other words, true consciousness consists in non-inert and non-automatic being of the thought.

For instance, only a human being can behave in a way that is different from the behavior of those around him – it may so happen that everyone lies, and only one person tells the truth. But what induced him to do so while the external state of affairs was dictating entirely different rules? It was the extra dimension of meaning and the understanding of what happens on the obverse side of the visible facts. This thought may seem unusual for a professional philosopher, yet Mamardashvili believed that it was this ability to maintain an interior dimension in spite of anything external that had been described by Descartes as his famous principle, the *cogito*. When this aspect of consciousness fails, a person – or, more precisely, her subjectivity – sinks into slumber; a simulation appears instead of wakeful consciousness, and the human turns into a zombie-like creature. In this case, according to Mamardashvili,

everything inevitably becomes saturated with nihilism, which may be briefly defined as the ‘anyone can do but me’ principle ... That is, ability in this case is connected with the assumed existence of some independent mechanism that acts on my behalf (be it happiness, social welfare, God’s Providence or something else). On the other hand, the *cogito* principle states that ability belongs *to me alone*, provided that I take my own

efforts and endeavor spiritually to achieve my own liberation and development (this, of course, is the most difficult thing in the world). Only in this way can the soul receive and gestate the 'supreme seed', overcoming itself and its circumstances and thereby rendering everything around no longer irreversible, final or completely predetermined. In other words, no longer hopeless. In a constantly developing world, there is always a place for me and for my action – if I am ready to start from scratch, to start with myself, who has already become something.<sup>3</sup>

The second critical condition of a true, wakeful consciousness consists in something that goes beyond consciousness itself and can be, for our purposes, referred to as the *actualization of the tacit*. What this means is that a conscious act may only take place in a conscious context – that is, in a medium defining the basic values of what goes on, provided that this medium extends beyond mere facts. To clarify this abstract description, let us consider a simple example. Suppose that someone hangs up white linen to dry on a clothesline, but, as a battle is being fought nearby, the white linen on the clothesline is taken for a sign of truce. Or else, suppose that someone enters a room where those already present have been discussing something for a long time. The person who just came in utters a phrase, which produces an effect entirely different from the speaker's intentions. In these two cases, our behavior may be deemed conscious if we understand, very clearly, the expectations of all the participants of the drama and the contingencies involved – what might have been understood, what was actually understood, and why what happened indeed happened. In other words, consciousness implies an understanding of tacit meanings, and is not limited to the superficial effects of meaning.

Mamardashvili emphasizes that the process of understanding should not be assumed to take tacit contents into consideration, and can prove to be simulative, so that 'being conscious' is merely imitated. It only seems to us that we understand something; in fact, we are playing a meaningless game where all we have to do is exchange signs without going deep into their meanings or contexts that hold such meanings. On the other hand, wakeful consciousness is rooted in the context and its tacit meanings, and takes them into account when performing actions. Mamardashvili connects this second requirement with Kant's 'apriorism': a cognizing subject first becomes constituted by the space of the potential meanings, and only then reads such meanings. The way something is perceived and understood is not a chaotic or random process; it

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3 Ibid., 12.



is governed by the hidden logic of the already shaped meanings, which always precede what will be actually understood. Similarly to the way in which the transcendental apparatus first shapes what will then be perceived (by locating an object in space and time, etc.), consciousness draws its understanding from the rooted structures of predetermined meaning.

What is of importance in this second condition is that *being conscious means always seeing something beyond what is directly visible*. It is this feature that Mamardashvili believes to be the essential characteristic of consciousness. Seeing only what is directly visible means seeing almost nothing. It is this 'beyond' that is essentially the structure that specifies the tacit presuppositions of meaning. This idea is best understood when applied to moral judgments. Moral events take place almost entirely beyond the limits of visible facts: their meanings are not 'here', they are not to be found in the world of facts and objectified substances. To see the meaning of a moral event (such as a value-related experience or a moral act) one must go beyond the limits of what we 'see'. What enables us to do this is the 'actualization of the tacit' that Mamardashvili speaks of. If consciousness is not rooted in it, it is not capable of moral judgment and is, effectively, but an imitation of consciousness. Mamardashvili states that

no natural outward description of acts of injustice, violence, etc. ever contains any cause for us to feel indignation, outrage, or any value-related emotion whatsoever. It does not contain this without the addition of the factual ('practical') fulfillment or givenness of the state of reason (what Kant referred to as 'the facts of reason') – not of rational knowledge of specific facts ... but of reason itself as realized consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

These somewhat obscure propositions can be clarified through a simple example. Let us ask ourselves a question: What, in terms of ordinary facts, do we see when we witness a robbery or a murder? By making an effort to 'shift' our consciousness in this direction, we can notice that observable facts have nothing to do with 'robberies' or 'murders'; all that we see are but the physical movements of bodies. The moral feelings of indignation or terror that are admixed thereto have unexplainable origin – its nature is not factual.

This poses a serious problem for philosophy – namely, the difficulty of the relationship between what *is* and what *ought to be*, as presented by David Hume, who wrote:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14–15.

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not.<sup>5</sup>

And, further, 'the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason'. Yet, being conscious – being 'awake', to invoke Mamardashvili's word – means having this kind of 'excessive' attitude to facts and seeing things in the world that make no part of observable reality.

How are these two conditions of a wakeful consciousness connected with civilized human existence? It turns out that they stand in a direct relationship. The emergence of a civilization as a community of consciousness is only possible when each individual consciousness is active in terms of the *cogito* and of the consciously understood tacit presuppositions, or *a priori* conceptual structures. Civilized existence is essentially humanity's being in these two modes. The absence of either of the two modes amounts to 'pre-civilized' or 'para-civilized' existence, seen by Mamardashvili as, in a sense, wild or bestial. If the principle of the activity of consciousness is violated, thought and any of its social forms ossify into dead patterns; if the principle of pre-determinedness of the context is violated, everything devolves into absurdity and a farce. The state in which tacit presuppositions are not apparent or are inconsistent with what is happening brings forth a phenomenon which Mamardashvili refers to as 'always too late'. If, at the visible factual level, we perform certain meaningful and noble actions but fail to take their context into account, reality may assume absurd forms – and absurdity, according to Mamardashvili, is essentially a value gap between facts and their tacit meanings.

Soviet people had few inherent rights, and had no basic right to travel beyond the borders of their country. The state, and the state alone, was entitled to accord people such a privilege in reward for their obedience and loyalty. This made access to freedom conditional upon surrendering to its absence – in order to be free 'later', one had to acquiesce in being unfree 'now'. But, as Mamardashvili saw it, this can hardly be possible. Let us imagine a situation in which the list of candidates for the presidency or the participating parties have to be approved by the government or the incumbent president. The resulting

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5 David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 213.

election race might look quite 'realistic': citizens might argue about who would win and bookmakers might even take bets. But, in view of the context – namely, the fact that the 'contestants' have been appointed by the state – the entire election race can only be considered a farce. These examples demonstrate that accurate and conscious apprehension of the context determines the situation. Should we fail to take it into consideration, we are bound to act unconsciously, looking rather clumsy in the process. We will go on in the belief that we are citizens, market agents, creators of cultural goods (film directors and writers, scientists and musicians) and generally human beings – but this will be nothing but sheer absurdity and imitation.

Mamardashvili insisted that human life cannot and may not be imitated. One simply cannot force people into an enclosure surrounded by barbed wire, with its territory being divided into sectors, the most loyal people being literally 'appointed' to be the most talented, exceptional and outstanding members of society, and then call it 'life'. One cannot be a citizen unless free in choosing one's authorities, nor can one be a full-fledged market participant, if one is compelled to patronize suppliers and manufacturers appointed by the state, instead of competing in the open market. Finally, one is absolutely deprived of any chance to create art when deprived of reality itself and given instead a primitive imitation. Any artist will agree that where there is no reality, there is nothing to portray. Life governed by such pervasive artificial constraints will be a mere simulation of life, and should a genuinely living person find herself amidst all this, she will discover with terror that she is surrounded by living corpses. This appears to have been Mamardashvili's own experience of living in USSR.

In his various talks on political subjects, Mamardashvili notes that European civil society 'crystallizes the Christianity of the Gospels in secularized social and civic institutions'.<sup>6</sup> In fact, democracy is secondary to the spiritual and moral cultural foundation that was formed over centuries and millennia, creating a special 'spatiotemporal density – the density of history'. Mamardashvili remarks that the Russian space in this sense is the 'maximally rarefied space, empty space', because there are not enough 'historic points', 'interlinkages' and 'condensations' on the basis of which the civic position of freedom and responsibility can be made possible for the inhabitants. It is with 'interlinkages' and 'condensations' that history commences, because 'history doesn't flow by itself'. We cannot say that the Russian experience in the twentieth century has not been rich and tragic, but its meanings have not yet been extracted

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<sup>6</sup> Mamardashvili, *Consciousness and Civilization*, 16.

and the crystallization of the catastrophic experience has not yet occurred, which means that its repetition cannot be written off as a possibility. If meaning has not been extracted, laws and institutions cannot be expected to preserve it, because their effectiveness is determined by the social 'density' we just mentioned.

In order to realize all this, one needs to attain the stage of conscious existence and to see at last that which Mamardashvili referred to as 'the genuine state of affairs'. In the later years of his creative career Mamardashvili would speak, with growing certainty and concern, of the undetermined and dormant consciousness of the Russian civilization. The formerly Soviet cultural space somehow seems to find itself still at the stage of formation, as Mamardashvili used to say, not having attained maturity as of yet. The attainment of consciousness is something that still lies ahead, consisting in the assimilation of the two principles named – the assumption of an active position in the expression of one's individual self and the establishment in a moral context. But if this is indeed so, then the priority for a philosopher in Russia must consist in providing interpretations of what consciousness is and why it has not yet found its full realization. Mamardashvili had dedicated his entire life to these questions. By doing so, he acknowledged implicitly that he had plunged into the mysteries of consciousness not out of idle curiosity, nor for the sake of finding a professional application for his philosophy degree; instead, he was led by a desire to find the key to awakening his society to conscious, civilized life, and to compelling his compatriots to break out of their dormant condition and to attain conscious forms of existence. To what extent he has succeeded is up to the future generations to decide. What can be claimed at present is that Mamardashvili strove to fulfill this aim with the entirety of his philosophical gifts and with all his human passion.

## Postscript

What is the contemporary Russian attitude toward Mamardashvili's legacy? In trying to formulate it, scholars of his work can be divided into two groups.

The first group includes unconditional admirers of Mamardashvili's thought. Apart from philosophers, this group encompasses persons from outside of the philosophical profession – a noticeable contingent of psychologists can be observed among them, for instance, thanks to Mamardashvili's continued presence as a living memory at the Moscow State University's Department of Psychology. Russian psychology continues to express a demand for philosophical interpretations of the problems of consciousness. Despite the current global practice of connecting psychology to the experimental sciences, Russian psychologists tend to be critical of this naturalization of consciousness. In addition to psychologists, Mamardashvili is loved and understood by writers and philologists, and even by many natural scientists (for example, physicists) who are interested in philosophical issues. He is revered by logicians, although their devotion is quite particular. Sometimes they claim that his lectures are too splendid to be analyzed or critically discussed and should instead be enjoyed in their original form, like poetry or other fine literature.

The second group is represented by those with a less generous attitude toward Mamardashvili's work. The most severely critical attitude is to be found among professional philosophers. This is sometimes explained by suggesting that philosophers cannot forgive Mamardashvili for professional inaccuracies and for his free improvisatory style. As specialists, they require unflinching textual accuracy and doxographic precision. The logic of this requirement is not difficult to understand, but it may not seem entirely just if we consider the fact that Mamardashvili never considered himself a historian of philosophy. Yet there are other reproaches made against him. Some philosophers are dissatisfied with the excessive complexity of his lectures and with their sense of the way that form, style and performance eclipse the content. Others suggest that his ideas are trivial, simplistic and naïve, in that they lack the technical specifics expected of professional work. These criticisms often contradict one another, contributing to the sense of mystery and ambiguity surrounding Mamardashvili's name.

If we consider the key-lines of these various criticisms and try to locate their common root, we will discover something significant and revealing about the fate of philosophy in Russia, not solely in relation to the period in which Mamardashvili himself was active, but also to the contemporary situation. It is impossible not to notice that at the heart of the disapproval often directed

at Mamardashvili's philosophical legacy lies an antagonism to his *originality* as someone thinking and speaking on his own behalf, and doing so lightly and with a directness of manner, without making excuses for this potential impertinence. Mamardashvili's manner of reasoning was always *authorial*, and the unmistakable individuality of his thought was always accompanied by a certain axiomatic tone, discernible every time he took the floor and indicating that what was being said was being said with a highly *personal* sense of both authority and responsibility.

This was the source of Mamardashvili's boldness in constructing his philosophical worlds and in furthering his intuitions. He invites us to become proponents of Foucault's discursivity – something that Mamardashvili himself was able to become. In many of his lectures, Mamardashvili repeats: the philosophical theories of the past and present are but open-ended reflections, invitations to a dialogue, and the history of philosophy is an ongoing history of which we ourselves are participants. The history of thought is fundamentally incomplete. Even if a compelling philosophical theory has already been developed and all its arguments have been uttered, each individual 'understanding' must relive the experience of understanding anew. Turning to the history of philosophy, we can experiment with its results. The results of someone else's understanding cannot be appropriated. One can only develop a personal understanding, but in order to achieve this, one must think and speak for oneself. Mamardashvili repeatedly stressed that Socrates's great discovery was that of a body of knowledge that cannot be assimilated as information. It is this 'knowledge' that we call properly philosophical. This knowledge always appears as actual understanding, not as a reproduction of what had been previously understood. Any philosophical statement can mean a great deal or nothing, depending on whether the individual encountering that statement has a personal history of understanding connected with it. In this sense, philosophical propositions are more like triggers than like units of information.

It follows that philosophy cannot be taught or learned; it is instead, as Mamardashvili observed, a necessary condition, 'for only by thinking independently and by practicing the ability to question and distinguish independently, can the human individual discover philosophy'.<sup>1</sup> Philosophy thus becomes not a matter of the 'acquisition of knowledge' but emerges as something that is experienced in the depth of individual thought. This, of course, is the reason why Mamardashvili himself had to speak exactly as he did, in digressive approximations, finding a way of approaching a thought so as to

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<sup>1</sup> Mamardashvili, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 356.

arrive at it himself and to bring along yet another consciousness. Meanwhile, philosophical terms and concepts are nothing more than markers that we use to preserve the path of our thought and the memory of its journey. The fruits of our experimentation with ideas cannot be expressed and must, nearly always, be rediscovered in order to be shared. They open up new possibilities for thought, intellectual self-realization and culture. Philosophical thinking, according to Mamardashvili, is a model of free thought as such.

What fears does this manifesto provoke? Why do we hear critical remarks about such an unlimited freedom of thought? The ostensible critical argument is that if everyone thinks as he or she pleases, neither subjugated to nor burdened by anything, then what kind of chaos and confusion of thoughts and opinions will we end up with? What will become of the strict disciplinary framework of philosophy? How will it maintain its identity? Mamardashvili hastens to reassure those assailed by such doubts. In actual fact, we need complete freedom of thought and understanding only in order to understand the little that can be understood. There is little point in concerning ourselves with the snowballing excess of opinions and positions. If we really exercise thought, not deviating from our given path, we will be on the same path as Plato, Kant or Descartes. We can only think of them in terms of them being 'our own' thoughts, but, despite the apparent diversity of systems and approaches, the space of philosophical thought is not all that variegated – it is actually a uniform continuum of individual acts of understanding of something common.

Though the paths of arriving at truths can be individual, the truths themselves are uniform and universal for all. Historic differences among philosophical systems arise only at the stage of a certain linguistic explication of thought-acts and their interpretations. It is another matter that those truths can only become someone's truth when the thinker personally travels down the path towards accepting them as truths. Therefore, we should not be afraid of discord and chaos in connection with free experimentation with philosophical ideas. Starting out on our individual paths from distant viewpoints, we grow closer and eventually encounter one another at the summit.

This permits us to understand better how Mamardashvili regarded the authority of the history of philosophy. Effectively, he distinguishes between 'real philosophy', which is uniform, and 'the philosophy of doctrines and systems', where the nuances of execution – the context of the epoch, the language of philosophical reasoning, the influence of other philosophers and so forth – are important. Whereas this philosophy of doctrines and systems can be paraphrased, real philosophy can only be experienced firsthand. This personal inflection is an important feature of real philosophy. Mamardashvili suggests that only at points of individuation that establish historic philosophical

systems as real philosophical acts does the ontological 'complete determination of the world' occur.

It is clear that Mamardashvili himself pursued 'real philosophy' and had no wish to be a doxographer. Neither did he wish to be an interpreter of philosophical systems. If he turns to the doctrines of Plato, Descartes or Kant, it is only as their legitimate interlocutor. This disposition is reflected in Mamardashvili's peculiar style of philosophical exposition. Mamardashvili was convinced that only spontaneous lived experience could generate philosophical questions. Only questions emerging from such experience can find answers involving philosophical concepts. Mamardashvili proceeds from the fact that 'the connectedness of consciousness as a certain space of thought is a prerequisite of the content of thought'.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, we need our historic and philosophical legacy only in order to extract objective thought content, independent of how it was understood and represented by the philosopher. These extracts form a chain of semantic mediations of the philosophical tradition, from which each contemporary thinker receives a key to ordering and clarifying his or her own intuitions.

What are, then, the true sources of the critical attitude to Mamardashvili's work among philosophers? In many cases, these attitudes are rooted in his frank declaration of his program of free philosophical thinking and with his assumed role as an interlocutor of the titans and luminaries of philosophic thought. If the painstaking documentation of someone else's thought in historical and philosophical research is not as important as the desire to extract the frozen forms of living thought from historic heritage, will this not devalue the work of historians? Mamardashvili would have warded off such concerns. It is necessary to remember that texts encode the experience of actual thought, and it is the task of the historian to decipher it. To do this, she needs to engage in thinking about the question, to think in the here-and-now about the philosophical question itself, no less than about what was proposed by a specific thinker in relation to this question.

Despite these considerations that Mamardashvili himself might have proposed, one must admit that in the Russian professional philosophical milieu, both in Mamardashvili's time and today, there is still considerable resistance to his original and independent work. There is generally a certain antagonism to theories and approaches developed by thinkers who think on their own behalf. The history of philosophy has always been strong in Russia. It has maintained and continues to maintain high standards that account for its vibrancy and

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<sup>2</sup> Merab Mamardashvili, 'The Idea of Continuity and the Philosophical Tradition' [*Идея преемственности и философская традиция*], *Istoriko-filosofskiy yezhegodnik*, 1989, 290.



international standing. At the same time, the development of autonomous philosophical doctrines has received little support in Russia. One has always needed to fight difficult battles in order to support and propagate authorial ideas. The most significant names of Russian-Soviet philosophy (Evald Ilyenkov, Alexander Zinoviev, Georgy Schedrovitsky, Alexander Pyatigorsky, etc.) are all associated with nonconformity, institutional confrontation and abrupt shifts between recognition and ostracism. These names refer to the historic period of Soviet culture when the work of a philosopher was linked with dissidence and accompanied by perennial tension around any original theories. This fact is continuous with the systematic extermination of the best and brightest minds, the destruction of schools, the persecution of the freedom of thought in all its forms and manifestations – a climate that, it would seem, should have left no chance of survival to any thought, much less philosophic thought as such.

The fruits of that large-scale ideological repression are still felt today. Philosophical schools are developed with great difficulty, links and productive research communications are only gradually formed. It is unfortunate that, even today, there is a widespread and persistent distrust of distinctive and original scholarly thought. Unusual and original approaches are either ignored or met with wary reserve. Interpretations deviating from accepted standards are often subject to severe criticism. Historical and philosophical authoritarianism still dominates. As a rule, a scholar working on some foreign author has every chance of building a successful career, but should he or she attempt to construct an original theory, great challenges can be expected. One of the most extraordinarily pejorative Russian words in common use, '*otsebyatina*', loosely translatable into English as 'editorializing', carries a connotation of sneering sarcasm directed at anyone ready and willing to express a first-person opinion. Needless to say, for Mamardashvili, the ability and the willingness to think for oneself, even in a climate so disparaging of first-person opinion, is the precondition of any philosophical work of value.

This circumstance appears to be at the very center of the tension generated by Mamardashvili's name in Russia. Mamardashvili was one of the few Russian philosophers who not only spoke openly on his own behalf, but did so with ease, without any regard for how strange it was at the time. He acted as if he were already immersed in a free and creative atmosphere, as if his listeners came to him from the same free world in which he attempted to locate himself. He approached his audience from a perspective that presupposed their freedom, which compounded the effect of his own liberty, frequently provoking irritation. As a result, he predicated the realization of his ideas and conceptions on the condition of 'internal exile', which permitted the creation of a certain space of freedom where his personality and persuasions were inviolate.

He provided an example of what it means to create original worlds, concepts and theories, to be a free scholar, to have a name and a voice, to express oneself creatively, and not just go to work at a university. It was as if he were saying: *if we are to think at all, let us think under our own names*. After all, the power and pleasure of thought are in that no one else can think 'for me'. The joy of intellectual work is that it escapes the pervasive threat of alienation. Unlike routine work, it avoids formalization, offering genuine creative joy. It is all the more absurd, then, to equate this type of work with the activities of a collector or taxonomist. And yet, the professional requirements for work in the humanities, and especially for philosophy in Russia, are often predicated on alienation – on banishing first-person 'editorializing' of any sort.

Still, today we face the possibility of emerging from 'internal exile' and of moving towards open dialogue, independent creativity and a new regard for original interpretations. Although we find ourselves early in this process, its workings are already undeniable. Its eventual success requires the acceptance of one specific value – the value of the *personal contribution* to the development of humanitarian thought or scientific knowledge. This value emerges from a yet deeper one, of recognizing the uniqueness of the individual, of interest and respect for the other person. It is this sentiment that reverberates in all of Mamardashvili's philosophical intuitions, making him such an attractive and charismatic figure, but inevitably exposing him to criticism.

I hope that the publication of this book will play a role in supporting Russian intellectuals in their growing readiness and desire to speak for themselves. I hope, too, that this book will be of help in conjuring the philosopher that Mamardashvili was. Even if blighted by ambiguity, the portrait will perhaps retain the essence of the one portrayed. As for the remaining contradictions, we can content ourselves with what Mamardashvili himself used to say: 'a philosopher, or a thinker, is a frontier creature and a representative of that which cannot be expressed'.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Mamardashvili, *Conversations About Thought*, 28.

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