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PHILOSOPHY IN THE ACT: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL
RELEVANCE OF MAMARDAŠVILI'S
PHILOSOPHIZING

ABSTRACT. Although topics in social and political philosophy might not be the first to associate with Mamardašvili, it is argued in this paper that key concepts in his thought, viz. the concepts of form, thought, and culture come together, in the 1980s in particular, in a notion of civil society that goes deeper than that of many of his contemporaries. The relevance of his philosophy at this point is intensified by the specific nature of Soviet philosophical culture, but, it is argued, extends well beyond that, fully justifying his honorary title of “Georgian Socrates”.

KEY WORDS: civil society, culture, Marxism, philosophical culture, public space, thought

“...moi, je suis du côté des Lumières.”
Merab Mamardašvili 1990 (PE, p. 44)

“I’m not struggling for the Georgian language – that battle has been won – but for what is being said in the Georgian language.” Merab Mamardašvili 1990¹

Merab Konstantinovič Mamardašvili (1930–1990) is not first of all associated with political and social philosophy. The focus of his philosophical work seems to have been, rather, in such areas as philosophy of culture, philosophy of mind, and the phenomenology of cognition and consciousness. The title of the 1990 ‘France Culture’ radio interviews, *La pensée empêchée*, suggests that his philosophy would have been different and less ‘political’, had it not taken form “in the shadow of the totalitarian regime.”² I question this: it may well be the case that living and working in Soviet society sharpened his perception of the political implications of what he was doing. However, his

work contains an elaboration of key aspects of cultural and social reality that are highly significant for every society, and that tend to be forgotten in all. My aim in this paper is to highlight these aspects.

In order to achieve this aim, I take three successive steps. The first entails a reconstruction of the philosophical culture in which Mamardašvili was active. The second consists in a discussion of three central concepts of his thinking: form, thought, and culture. The third step, finally, makes the transition from these central concepts to the notion of civil society. Since the publication of Mamardašvili's textual heritage, in its written and its spoken form, is still far from complete, I shall base my analysis primarily on the materials published in *Raboty* and other reliable sources.

MAMARDAŠVILI IN SOVIET PHILOSOPHICAL CULTURE

One thing that must be done to give Mamardašvili his well-deserved place in the history of philosophy is to assess his place within the development of Soviet-Russian philosophical culture. Born and raised in Georgia, he spent most of his career as a philosopher in Soviet Russia, and his untimely death in 1990 preceded the end of the Soviet Union by an year. Although he traveled extensively (for a Soviet intellectual who was not closely related to the CPSU), considered himself a cosmopolitan, and could have remained abroad, he did not forsake the USSR.³ The qualification 'Soviet philosopher' seems thus appropriate – but is this not a *disqualification* by definition? Mamardašvili certainly did not consider himself a 'Soviet' philosopher: he explicitly denied that a philosopher can belong to a certain nation at all (OMP, p. 59), and thus be a Russian or a Georgian philosopher, and would just as explicitly have denied that a philosopher can be Western or Soviet. At the same time, any account of Soviet philosophy would be incomplete were it to omit his name: along with such figures as Eval'd Il'enkov, Aleksej Losev, or Mikhail Bakhtin, he has played an important role in philosophical life in the USSR in the period following World War II.

As far as philosophy is concerned, there are at least three mistaken preconceptions with respect to the Soviet period in Russian history. The first is that there was no philosophy at all in the USSR. Indeed, for a brief period (1936–1947) there was no public appearance of anything philosophically serious, but even during that period there still were professionals doing serious philosophical work, and many classical texts from Western philosophy appeared in Russian translation. The second misunderstanding consists in the belief that Soviet philosophy had nothing to do with philosophy. It is true that the dogmatic philosophy that was taught in schools and many institutions for higher learning, and based on exam-oriented textbooks of the *Osnovy marksistsko-leninskoy filosofii* type, was not philosophically interesting. But it is also true that interesting work was taking place, in more specialized research, in the research institutes and university faculties for philosophy. Otherwise, there would not have been a series of monographs on Soviet philosophy. The third misunderstanding asserts that there existed, in the far corners of Soviet philosophical culture, white ravens who were in no way influenced or “contaminated” by the system. A philosopher’s role in culture and society is always in part influenced by the philosophical culture in which she or he participates, even if this philosopher’s project then becomes the ‘counter-cultural’ one of re-establishing philosophy against a dogmatic institution. Therefore, any historical assessment of Mamardashvili’s work has to take into account the realities of Soviet philosophical culture.

Soviet philosophy has been the object of numerous investigations within the framework of so-called ‘philosophical sovietology’ which was designed to describe objectively (on the basis of primary sources), criticize philosophically (on the basis of mainstream philosophical positions), and to engage in all earnestness (on the basis, preferably, of direct encounters) with the work done by philosophers in the USSR.⁴ This perspective focused, during its period of existence (1958–1991), on the oscillation between “the logical pushes and ideological pulls ... operative in Soviet philosophy,”⁵ i.e. on the sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful attempts by Soviet

philosophers to ‘do philosophy’ within the institutional framework of Soviet philosophical culture. “Philosophy,” in Mamardašvili’s words, “did not exist in the Soviet Union and, apparently, does not exist today either outside the ideological state apparatus – and the latter is huge (R XIX, p. 204).” Of course, he did not deny the existence of philosophy *in* the USSR – he would then have been renouncing himself as a philosopher – he denied the existence of philosophy that was *not* somehow related to the ideological state apparatus.

When, therefore, I speak about Mamardašvili’s place within ‘Soviet-Russian philosophical culture’, I mean to point out that for him both Soviet philosophical culture and the predominance of the Russian element in it were *facts of his life*. As he said in a 1988 interview: “A normal life is one, the point of reference of which was formed by Marxism or socialism and the belief in the ideals of Marxism and socialism. A belief that presupposes sincerity. (...) Therefore, say, the Komsomol experience was, obviously, a sincere experience for them (R XIX, p. 207).” Nor was Mamardašvili’s situation any different. But he never took an interest in politics or in attempts to reform or improve real existing socialism (R XIX, p. 211). From a sovietological perspective, Mamardašvili was – literally – a marginal figure.

It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, *not* to apply moral categories to the history of philosophical thought in the USSR. Obviously, there are ‘villains’ in this history: the figures of M.T. Iovčuk and M.B. Mitin should be sufficient proof of this. Just as obviously, there are victims and martyrs: Pavel Florenskij, Aleksej Dobrovol’skij, and many others. Recently, Boris Emel’janov published a survey of philosophers and other thinkers who had been ‘repressed’ under the title “*Železnyj vek’ ruskoj mysli* [The Iron Age of Russian Thought (Emel’janov 2004)]. He documents 561 thinkers who had either been exiled, sent to a GULag, or locked up in a *psikhuška*, in a period covering the entire twentieth century, including thereby several victims of the tsarist regime such as Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj or Ljubov’ Aksel’rod-Ortodoks, and some dubious examples, such as Isaiah Berlin, who was indeed forced into exile with his parents in 1920, i.e. at the age of 11 ... On the whole, however,

the book is an impressive, and depressing, account of repression, highlighting the devastating impact of the Soviet regime on Russian thought.

Mamardašvili is not listed in Emel'janov's book. He was not a victim in the direct sense of the term: he was neither imprisoned nor exiled, he did not emigrate, but could travel abroad and maintain his contacts in France, Italy, the USA: "I was lucky in everything: friendship, people, I was lucky that they did not put me in jail ..."⁶ At the same time, his later career was a story of harassment, censorship, and 'war with the authorities [*bor'ba s vlastjami*]. Born in 1930 in Gori, Stalin's birthplace, he finished gymnasium with a gold medal and went to Moscow State University in 1949, from which he graduated in 1954. He started work with the leading philosophical journal *Voprosy filosofii* in 1957. Having finished his *kandidatskuju dissertaciju* in 1961, he began work in Prague as an editor of the journal *Problemy mira i socializma*. Upon his return from Prague, where he met with communist intellectuals from Italy and France, he was made *nevyezdnyj*, i.e. forced to stay in the USSR, because of an illegal visit without visa to Paris where he became friends with Louis Althusser; with the result that he was not permitted to resume travel abroad before 1988.⁷ It was in Prague, Annie Epelboin writes, "that he understood in practice what civil society is."⁸ From 1968 until 1974, he worked once again for *Voprosy filosofii*, as vice-editor under editor-in-chief Ivan Frolov (later Gorbachev's major ideologue), whom he knew from his years in Prague (R XIX, p. 209). One of Mamardašvili's key texts, *Forma prevraščennaja*, appeared in the fifth volume of the *Filosofskaja Ėnciklopedija* (1970). He defended his *doktorskuju dissertatsiju* in Tbilisi in 1970. In 1974 he was kicked out from *Voprosy filosofii* and his courses in Moscow were suppressed. He returned to the Georgian capital Tbilisi in 1979 where he worked in the Philosophical Institute of the Academy of Sciences, visiting Moscow for lectures.

His few publications placed him outside official Soviet philosophy, which explains why he became, as Philip Boobbyer puts it, "a role model for the intelligentsia during perestroika."⁹ During the last years of his life, he was actively engaged in the

coming-to-be of an independent Georgia, where, again, he confronted conformism in the name of freedom of thought.¹⁰ He died, exhausted, of a heart attack at Vnukovo Airport, as he was about to return to Tbilisi. Though not a victim in the proper sense of the term, one can safely state that his life as an independent philosopher had been made difficult.

All this has to do with the place and role in society of the ‘thinking person’, i.e. of what traditionally has been called the *intelligent* in Russian, a usage that gave rise to the transculturally accepted notion of ‘intelligentsia’, i.e., those who, contrary to intellectuals (who limit themselves to specific professional areas), “specialize in the universal.”¹¹ Drawing on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Mamardašvili in 1968 pointed out how the role of the *intelligentsia* in late-capitalist society differs from the role the intellectual elite had played in the ‘classical’ period of capitalism, as well as from the role it still ascribed to itself in Soviet society:

... the monopoly position of the *intelligentsia* has disappeared. (...) The *intelligentsia* can no longer pretend to know for others or to think for them, and then to defend or enlighten them in a paternalistic manner, generalizing a ready-made absolute truth or a humanist ethics (ISO, p. 426).

Rejecting the ideology of the intelligentsia, aptly qualified as “enlightenment absolutism [*prosvetitel'skij absoljutizm*]”, as archaic and residual (ISO, p. 425f), he sketched the dilemma – of prime importance in 1968 – of intellectuals in developed societies: “whether to be ‘organic intellectuals’ in the Gramscian sense, engaged in the reproduction of the ideological superstructure of their particular segment of society, or to join others in democratic struggle against the existing order (ISO, p. 430).” Presumably, author and reader alike knew that such an analysis applied to Soviet as well as to ‘bourgeois’ Western society.

Against the backdrop of Soviet philosophical culture it was inevitable that Mamardašvili would become a hero of free thought, and he is rightly considered as such. Few philosophers were more independent, both intellectually and institutionally,

from official philosophy. In some publications, such as his 1968 *Formy i sodržanie myšlenija* we do find occurrences of *citatičestvo*, i.e. ritual references to Marx, Engels and Lenin (FSM, p. 3, p. 24, p. 139), but even here most of the references are substantial (FSM, p. 149, p. 172). And in ‘Forma prevraščennaja [metamorphosed, transmuted form; *verwandelte Form*]’, his references to *Das Kapital* and *Theorien über den Mehrwert* are not at all ritual, but serious and to the point (FP70, p. 386).¹² Mamardašvili was one of those Soviet philosophers who, in the 1950s, worked on Marx’s epistemology in *Das Kapital* (PE, p. 18), and later – like other *šestidesjatniki* such as Ėrih Solov’ev – broke away from Marxism with the help of Marx’s *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte* of 1844.

Mamardašvili’s rejection of Marxism *as an ideology* did not keep him from posing, in essence, the same critical question about the *real* or *actual* [*wirklich*] role of intellectuals that we find in the early Marx: “Keinen von diesen Philosophen ist es eingefallen, nach dem Zusammenhang der deutschen Philosophie mit der deutschen Wirklichkeit, nach dem Zusammenhange ihrer Kritik mit ihrer eigenen materiellen Umgebung zu fragen.”¹³ If one replaces ‘philosophers’ by ‘*intelligent*’ and German by Soviet, and thus poses the question about the *real* function of the Soviet intelligentsia, about what they were *actually* doing and being paid for, one invokes Marx against Marxism–Leninism. Much of Mamardašvili’s later work can be regarded as a reflection upon the *real* role of the philosopher in society. He gradually shifted to his own understanding of the intellectual’s role and responsibility in society, which I would call the *making-present-of-thought* in culture and society. This, to be sure, in fact means that the *intelligent* does become a specialist: (s)he no longer presents the result of thinking, i.e. a claimed truth, to society, but thought itself. This topic is elaborated in one of Mamardašvili’s last publications, “Mysl’ v kul’ture” (1989d): “I would like to examine the question of thought in culture, having in mind some kind of miracle of thought [*čudo myslj*] and its impossibility, other than by miracle, to take place in a culture... (R XIX, 30).” Interested in the conditions under which thought can take place – and

emphasizing the lack of these conditions in (Soviet) Russia – Mamardašvili points to the necessity “of ‘machines’ that have been put in motion [*nalažennymi mašinami*] – ‘time machines’,” required for occurrent thought: “And such ‘machines’ require, of course, societal, public space. For if that disappears, thought disappears too. Public space is, precisely, a condition for thought itself (R XIX, p. 42).”

THREE KEY CONCEPTS: FORM, THOUGHT, CULTURE

The core of the socio-political conception present in the philosophy of Mamardašvili is formed by three concepts: form [*forma*], thought [*mysl'*] and culture [*kul'tura*]. First of all, Mamardašvili ‘accuses’ Russian culture and philosophy of a neglect of form and an exclusive focus on content [*soderžanie*], for example in the form of pure ‘spirituality [*dukhovnost'*]’ and relates this to the opposition of the Western and the Orthodox-Christian tradition:

Ainsi la culture européenne est basée sur l'idée de l'accompli, sur l'idée de donner forme à tout, à la vie politique, à la vie spirituelle, *donner forme*. (...) La culture orthodoxe est *obsédée par l'idéalité*. La chose ou la forme concrète n'est jamais l'idéal. Alors, si ce n'est pas l'idéal, ce n'est rien du tout (PE, p. 61).

This explains the ‘lack of interest’ in countries like Russia or Georgia in the formal character of a legal system, and, more generally, a neglect of the concrete, finite, as opposed to the ideal, infinite world. Rejection of the formal aspects of democracy, for example, is related to the failure to understand that democracy *is* a (legal) form that has to be ‘filled’ with (social) ‘matter’. Mamardašvili’s comment is to the point: “The culture of democracy, if there is one, means that I do not dissociate myself from the idea, from the recognition of the fact that democracy is only a form, that *democracy is only formal*, and not an object [*predmet*] ... (R XIX, p. 186).” Mamardašvili, in the end, was not concerned with formalism, but with finding the right forms, including metamorphosized forms.

A second key notion, for Mamardašvili, is the notion of *mysl'*, which he contrasted with *myslenie* and which is equivalent, in other languages, to *la pensée, der Gedanke, thought*: it is that difficult-to-grasp moment when thought is not merely thinking something or following an argument, but coincides with itself and *is* reality, in which there is full adequacy of form and content. *Myslenie*, by contrast, points to a process of thinking, extended in time, and corresponds with *le penser, das Denken, or thinking*. Much of Mamardašvili's thinking is about the nature and experience of *mysl'*, which explains his interest in Descartes and Kant: the individuality of *mysl'* is not a contingent factor, but the existential ground of thought. At the same time, Mamardašvili links this individual character of human thought not to an abstract subject, but to the context in which the individual human being is thinking: culture and society. *Mysl'* is not the place where the thinking subject is closed within itself, but, on the contrary, where it opens up and transcends itself and its determinations. Another way of pointing out the distinction is that *myslenie* can be made present in written text, it can be studied, analyzed, and taught, whereas *mysl'* can only be 'gone through'; paradoxically, *myslenie* is always somebody's while being objective, whereas *mysl'* exists only in the act of a subject while essentially being nobody's.

In his texts on the history of philosophy, Mamardašvili displays a clear preference in making past thought alive over studying some philosopher's *myslenie* – the latter is certainly important, but it is a means, not the goal: "Consequently, the whole problem with respect to the riches of thought that we find in the history of philosophy, too, is that it can be successive [*preemstvenno*] only to the extent to which I can reproduce these riches as a possibility of my own thought (IPFT, p. 287)." In principle, moreover, it is possible that somebody develops a thought, which later turns out to have been already developed by another philosopher, thus already being part of what Karl Popper called 'World III':

At this point there can, undoubtedly, be coincidences, and even literal ones with what someone, at some time, Plato say, was thinking, or what somebody has thought just now, a thousand kilometers away from us. Some

unknown Ivanov or Čavčavadze. That doesn't matter. (...). The question of plagiarism, I repeat, of influence, linkage of ideas is, to my mind, not to the point in this case (IPFT, p. 286).

In this sense, philosophy does not *need* its history in order to be what it is, even if that history can assist us, as it assisted Mamardašvili. The task of the history of philosophy as a discipline is to 'revive', i.e. 'make alive again' the history of philosophy understood as past: "... we are alive in that act [of thought, EvdZ], which we perform now, if we keep our predecessors *alive*, rather than burying them in the text (IPFT, p. 287)." Going one step further, Mamardašvili asserts that "if all of philosophy is a single human being, thinking eternally and uninterruptedly, then this [history of philosophy, EvdZ] also is a necessary act of remembering that brings us back to life [*vozdžadajuščij nas k žizni*]." If taken literally, this brings him close to theories of the '*noosfera*' familiar from Lev Gumilëv; if taken metaphorically, it points to the core of Mamardašvili's conception of philosophy: it is the place where, in and through thought, a human being both realizes and transcends itself.

Although this may seem to suggest a kind of philosophical *action directe* or 'philosophy for the sake of philosophy', or even a *philosophism* in which philosophical thought replaces reality, this is not the case. Mamardašvili emphasized the active and live aspect of philosophical thought in opposition to dry, academic 'philosophology', but he also affirmed that "the history of philosophy, naturally, cannot be the only philosophical task" and that the "self-generating wheel of terminological machinery [*samokručenie terminologičeskoj mašiny*] ... must of course exist (IPFT, p. 292)." His critical position with respect to 'real existing philosophy' was simple and clear: "... what should not disappear is the initial existential meaning [*žiznennyj smysl*] of philosophy as such with its abstract language that creates the space in which the *thinking being* [*mysljaščij*, literally '*cogitans*', EvdZ] is being reconstituted [*vossozdaëtsja*] (ibid.)." The Russian *vossozdaëtsja* can mean both 'is being reconstituted' and 'is reconstituting itself' – I suggest taking it literally in both senses, as a means of expressing the immediacy of this event: the *mediation* consists in the creation, assisted by such

things as studying the history of philosophy or of reading Kant or Descartes (or Mamardašvili, for that matter), of a *space* that can form the place for the *cogitans*, the *mysljaščij* to emerge in an immediate self-conscious act: “Thought exists only in being executed, only in a space that is not occupied by prejudices, prohibitions, etc. (R XIX, p. 42).”

Mysljaščij, as a present participle, is adjectival to a *subject*: it is a ‘thinking someone’, but this someone is a ‘res cogitans’ only *in actu*, not a substantial ‘I’ to begin with. Mamardašvili thus holds to a literal interpretation of Descartes’ statement that “...cette proposition: *Je suis, j’existe*, est nécessairement vraie, toutes les fois que je la prononce, ou que je la conçois en mon esprit.”¹⁴ In Mamardašvili’s words: “This is why Descartes said that the proposition ‘I think, therefore I am’ is true every time that I think it and express it (or do not express it) (KR, p. 180f).”¹⁵ Although ‘I’ cannot claim that, as a result of ‘Je pense, je suis’ there is something like a ‘given’ or ‘tangible’ something, it neither is the case that ‘I’ exists only in the instances when it conceives of itself as thinking, as an occasionalist interpretation would have it, and as, in fact, Descartes suggests when he writes: “*je suis, j’existe*: cela est certain; mais combien de temps [italics mine, EvdZ]? A savoir, autant de temps que je pense; car peut-être se pourrait-il faire, si je cessais de penser, que je cesserais en même temps d’être ou d’exister.”¹⁶ Does being a “thing that thinks [*une chose qui pense*]” depend on the repeated act or on the continuity of thought? If the first, what reason do I have to assume that I am *the same* thinking something; if the second, how can this continuity come about if I am not *actually* thinking continuously? This is, of course, Descartes’ fundamental problem. According to Mamardašvili, something irreversible has taken place:

The word ‘I’, in all of Descartes’ arguments in which ‘*ego cogito, ego sum*’ occurs, means, in the first place, ...the discovery of the irreplaceable existence of oneself in thought, and, secondly, that this irreplaceable existence is the existence of a transformed self [*sebja preobrazovannogo*]. (...). In other words, looking at one’s non-transformed self, it is impossible to get to the necessary point, but having transformed oneself, it is possible. (...) And, most of all, if the act of existence of the ‘I’ in thought and by thought has taken place, then it is already impossible to move back (KR, p. 180).

However, the most interesting and original move made by Mamardašvili follows immediately:

Descartes ... demonstrated that being cannot be invented or imagined, it is not generated by thought; when it has occurred, *we* cannot turn back (inasmuch as there is no interval between thinking and existence) in order to prove, dissect, explain. '*We – are [My – est]*' is a tautology in the fruitful sense of the term, an ontological equalization in being and understanding (KR, p. 181; italics mine, EvdZ).

It is important, to my mind, to pose the ever crucial question 'Who are we?' at this point: the 'we' in the first part of this quotation is a neutral 'we', similar to Descartes' 'we' in such sentences as "d'une seule question nous tomberions insensiblement en une infinité d'autres ... et je ne voudrais pas abuser du peu de temps [not 'de votre temps', EvdZ] et de loisir qui me [not 'qui nous'] reste...",¹⁷ whereas the second 'we' is an explicit extension, a pluralization by Mamardašvili of the 'egoistic' Cartesian argument, turning a tautological 'I am' into an allegedly tautological 'We are'.

Descartes was performing his *Méditations* in 1641 in complete seclusion ("je me suis procuré un repos assuré dans une paisible solitude")¹⁸, and the dialogue of his text is an inner one. Mamardašvili, by contrast, was bringing Descartes' thought alive in early 1981 in a lecture hall at the *Moscow Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology*, engaging in interactive dialogue with an audience of more than 300 people: "...dans mes relations avec l'auditoire, je sais comment le toucher, parce que quand je fais un cours, quand je donne une conférence, je suis présent moi-même, ouvertement, je joue ma vie pendant la conférence (PE, p. 18)."¹⁹ While Descartes' aim was to find an Archimedean point, "un point qui fût fixe et assuré," Mamardašvili's aim was to single-handedly revive philosophical thought in the USSR. What distinguished him from Descartes, therefore, is not a different understanding of human thought, but the insistence on, precisely, communicating, hence on the spoken word: live thought is "consciousness aloud [*soznanie vsluchh*]" and "manifest consciousness [*javlennoe soznanie*]" (R XIX, p. 87).

By *performing* the Cartesian argument rather than talking about it, Mamardašvili was not only *publicly reconstituting* himself as a *mysljaščij*, but also constituting a ‘thinking we’, a community of *mysljaščikh*, of ‘things that think’. In this, he was not only trying to counteract the destruction of free thought by the Soviet system, including its handbooks of Marxist–Leninist philosophy which were “impossible to teach” and could only “be learnt by heart, mechanically, and be repeated as such during the exam (PE, p. 13),” including, too, its party-state apparatuses that pursued him and had a place ready for him in the GULag. In addition to this, his position also relates back to a Russian tradition of reluctant assimilation of both Descartes and Kant that goes back to, most philosophically, Vladimir Solov’ëv, whom Mamardašvili rightly regarded as the starting point of a “secular autonomous philosophy” in Russia, a paradoxical phenomenon as this philosophy was deeply religious, but secular in the sense of founding a “space of autonomous spiritual life, of independent philosophical thought (R XIX, p. 93; PE, p. 63).”²⁰

In the introduction to the Italian edition of *Kantianskie variacii*, Daniela Steila pays due attention to Mamardašvili’s attempt to “liberate the author [Kant, EvdZ] from the false image that had been imposed in Russian culture.”²¹ Despite the more balanced reception by Solov’ëv, who, for example, took Kantian ethics as his point of departure, Kant was generally perceived as a bourgeois individualist, for example by Vjačeslav Ėrn in his notorious ‘Ot Kanta k Kruppu [From Kant to Krupp],’ written in 1914: “Genealogically, the arms of Krupp are ... the offspring of the offspring, i.e. the grandchildren of the philosophy of Kant.”²² It was from this perception that Mamardašvili wanted to liberate Kant, “sketching rather a ‘French’ Kant capable of living in society ..., a ‘cosmopolitan’ Kant...”²³ Still, his own move beyond an individualistic or egoistic position is in the line of Russian religious philosophers like Solov’ëv or Semën Frank, who tried to found a ‘philosophy of we’. At this point, Mamardašvili might be closer to a Russian philosophical tradition than is usually assumed, and perhaps than he himself realized. It is not difficult, for example, to

apply the concept of *sobornost*’ to a lecture hall filled with *aficionadi* following Mamardašvili in his public ‘thought performance’ and constituting themselves as part of a single whole.

Abstract though the language of Mamardašvilian ‘thought performance’ may be, its effect is most concrete: his ‘*mysljaščij*’ means the reconstitution of “a person, capable of thinking independently, of making decisions, etc. (IPFT, p. 292).” And this is, precisely, the kind of person needed for ‘civil society’: “In order to be citizens, i.e. to be socially competent [*social’no gramotno*], we must understand certain abstract truths regarding ourselves, our own maximum possibilities [*svoi predel’nye vozmožnosti*] (R XIX, p. 92).” As we see, Mamardašvili’s apparent ‘subjectism’ not only does not exclude the cultural and social dimensions. On the contrary, the latter fully depend on it: what Mamardašvili took from Hegel is the rejection of any “gnoseological robinsonade” (FSM, p. 56, n. 1, and p. 57). Thought starts in and with the individual, but this individual is, on the one hand, embedded in society, and, on the other hand, the presence of thought has its effects in surrounding culture and society.

Coming to the third key concept, *culture*, Mamardašvili’s positive conception of culture is one that can be properly called *transculture*. Culture, for him, is cosmopolitan by definition: he loved Russian poets like Osip Mandel’štam or Aleksandr Blok just as much as French poets like François Villon or Antonin Artaud. His pluralization of the Cartesian *cogito* not only means the foundation of *intersubjectivity*, but also points to *transsubjectivity*. In thought, a human being transcends his own particularity, including his cultural identity, transcends his “being in relation to the situation where he is, he transcends the situation ... the culture that is given, the conventions of life that are all given” in the direction of his “second fatherland” (PE, p. 46f). Mikhail Epstein is right, I think, to perceive Mamardašvili’s notion of culture as opposed not only to any “monolithic cultural canon” but also to multiculturalism to the extent to which the latter boils down to a ‘pluralithic’ cultural canon, i.e. a glorification of a plurality of cultures, each a closed and enclosing unity in itself.²⁴ A critic *avant la lettre* of multi-

culturalism, Mamardašvili was acutely aware of the limiting capacity of culture: “... les cultures – et c’est leur condition vitale – luttent toujours contre la transcendance, elles enferment toujours l’être humain, parce que la culture tend vers l’ordre, vers la stabilité (PE, p. 47).” This means that culture in the proper sense of the term, means a break with what is culturally given, since culture is never ‘given’: “... culture can also be defined thus: culture is the possession [*vladenie*] of that which cannot be possessed in an objective, thing-like, or consumer-like manner [*predmetno, veščno i potrebitel’ski*] (R XIX, p. 186).” As Epstein puts it:

What needs to be preserved, in Mamardašvili’s view, is the right to live beyond one’s culture, on the borders of cultures, to take a “step transcending one’s own surrounding, native culture and milieu, not ... for the sake of any other culture, but for the sake of nothing. Transcendence into nothing. Generally speaking, such an act is truly the living, pulsating center of the entire human universe ...”²⁵

CIVIL SOCIETY

Several lines of thought in Mamardašvili come together, in the late 1980s, in the then popular notion of civil society [*graždanskoe obščestvo*]: “... that sum of problems that we are talking about so much today, can in reality be reduced to a single one – the problem of civil society (R XIX, p. 45).” When he speaks of ‘civil society’, Mamardašvili has indeed in mind civil, not bourgeois society, thus departing from the standard Marxist interpretation of ‘bürgerliche Gesellschaft’.²⁶ Civil society is, however, a complicated notion with a long history, and this history marks its revival in the late 20th century.²⁷ In their rich account of social theory since the fall of communism, William Outhwaite and Larry Ray discuss how the massive civil society discourse that emerged since the 1980s revolved around two concepts of civil society, one that can be called ‘classical’, based on, first, the idea “that a democratic polity is secured by being embedded in dense networks of civil associations, such as clubs, trade associations, voluntary societies, churches, parent–

teacher associations, sports clubs, and the like, that generate ‘social capital’,” and, second, the idea that civil society “protects against state incursion yet strengthens the (liberal democratic) state”; and another, ‘(Central) East European’ one, in which “civil society is explicitly antithetical to the state.”²⁸ The tension between these two concepts of civil society, one with its stress on support of the polity, the other with its stress on resistance and check with respect to the state, holds only partially for (Soviet) Russia with its strong tradition of statism and statehood [*gosudarstvennost*].²⁹ Here, intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the question of *how to establish* a modern (democratic) polity and (civil) society, and hence on the conditions for a post-totalitarian civil society: rule of law, constitutions, civil rights, political freedom, rather than on the kind of individual needed, not only to populate, but to *be* such a society.³⁰

Mamardašvili was among those who went one level deeper, to the single *crucial* condition for a free society: individual human beings who, to use Nelli Motrošilova’s words, “take the decision to be free.”³¹ What was lacking, in most discussions, was precisely the kind of reflexivity that was typical of Mamardašvili: the reflection *about* what a free individual is *by* a freely acting individual *in* the very act of thought. The ‘human factor [*čelovečeskij faktor*]’ was, of course, invoked by intellectuals and politicians alike, including his earlier boss Frolov, but it mostly appeared as a call to ‘create’ a ‘new man’ to replace the *homo sovieticus*. When confronted with the abstract character of this position (as if they themselves were not part of the same Soviet society), they would readily engage in acts of self-flagellation, rather than taking seriously the very act of self-reflection as the possibility of their resurrection as citizens.

Interestingly, the notion of civil society already crops up in a 1968 text on Hegel, *Formy i sodержanie myšlenija*:

In point of fact, the *Logik*, representing the system of the ‘absolute idea’, must represent the entire system of general norms and forms of organization of culture from its abstract side alone – i.e., from the side of the *logical* (‘ponjatijnye’ [*begrifflich*]) ideal forms [*ideal’nye obrazovanija*] that lie at their

basis; these are, according to Hegel, the highest form of rationality realizing itself both in these more concrete forms of culture (in the norms of language, morality, right, civil society in general, etc.), and in the activity of the subject in the field of knowledge (FSM, p. 56f).

Generally critical of rather than sympathetic to Hegel's idealism, Mamardašvili focuses on the identity of form and content in the knowing subject and perceives it in the fact that the subject is *thinking* when it knows something. This explains both his interest in Descartes and Kant and his distance from Hegel and Marx: for Mamardašvili, the absolute is not the intrinsic rationality of reality, including culture and society, but the live act of thought, i.e. *mysl'*, in which the thinking individual transcends him/herself, accomplishing her/his "second birth" as a human being (PE, p. 13). In Mamardašvili's view, man is not a product of nature, but comes into being through a second birth, mediated by the spoken word [*reč'*, *parole*, *logos empsuchos*].³² "Man is a protracted effort [*dlitel'noe usilie*]," according to Mamardašvili, and "the larger part of man is outside him (R XIX, p. 19)."

For Mamardašvili, culture and civil society are 'live' categories: they exist in the act and thus are never complete when they exist only as 'given' institutions, cultural heritage, theories, or memory. In ways that resemble Hannah Arendt's notion of freedom as the capacity of beginning something new – *not* in the Aristotelian sense of actualizing a potentiality, but in the Augustinian sense of '*creatio ex nihilo*'³³ – Mamardašvili emphasizes "... what I would call additional or live acts, living states [*živye sostojanija*], having their own ontological or ontic [*ontologičeskie ili bytijnye*] conditions of possibility (R XIX, p. 43)." These live acts are indeed miraculous in the precise sense of being both *ex nihilo* and '*in nihilum*'. They do have necessary conditions: freedom, public space, but their sufficient ground is the thinking and acting being itself, i.e. a (human) person. Moreover, since they are not individual acts, they form the basis of society and polity – *polis*, as the Greeks would merge the two – in the sense of future-oriented concerted action of free citizens.³⁴ "Man, according to Mamardašvili, does not exist – he is becoming (R XIX, p. 28)," this man-in-process, through

and in acts of thought, generates culture in a living sense, and civil society is the space where this can take place, because it realizes the conditions for the existence of ‘time machines’.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to combine two perspectives: the precision and impartiality of a historical account with a ‘partisan’ philosophical perspective that attempts to ‘revive’ the pulsation of Mamardašvili’s thought. Although the two perspectives neither imply nor presuppose each other, they can complement each other. Moreover, the historical perspective should be, in my opinion, the background of attempts to revive Mamardašvili’s thought. To vary his own expression in application to himself: “... if someone is able to contemplate something Mamardašvilian as a possibility of his own thinking, and not of his erudition, then Mamardašvili is alive as well (IPFT, p. 287f).”

‘Loneliness is my profession,’ is the title of an interview the Latvian philosopher Uldis Tironis conducted with Mamardašvili in 1990.³⁵ In this interview, Mamardašvili pointed out that his loneliness was of a personal character – “I am a chronic specialist in loneliness since early childhood” – as well as of a professional nature: “And then, loneliness is my profession ... (OMP, p. 69)”³⁶ Leaving the first form to biographers, we can, I think, distinguish two senses of this professional loneliness of the philosopher, one structural, the other contextual. In the first sense, intended by Mamardašvili himself, philosophy is a ‘lonely activity’ in any case, as some of his definitions of philosophy make clear: “Philosophy is just a fragment of the smashed mirror of universal harmony that has fallen into an eye or a soul (OMP, p. 64).” And: “... philosophy is a reaction of the dignity of life in the face of anti-life. That’s it. And if there is a pathos of life, then man cannot be a non-philosopher (OMP, p. 67).”

In a second sense, his was a lonely position because, unlike most of his colleagues, he did not actively deal with the problem of Marxist–Leninist dogmatics or with Marxism as the official

ideology in the Soviet Union. In interviews, he explicitly declared that he was not a Marxist – let alone a Marxist–Leninist: “‘Are you a Marxist?’ ‘No.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘Because Marx was mistaken on too many points’ [*Potomu čto Marks sliškom vo mnogom ošibalsja*] (R XIX, p. 169).” In a philosophical culture in which philosophy was Marxist–Leninist by reason of political command, Mamardašvili’s position guaranteed exclusion from official philosophical culture. Elsewhere, he suggested:

Maybe, contrary to all the others, I was the only Marxist, in the sense that Marx influenced me in philosophy in some respects [*v čem-to*], while many had no idea about Marx. But I was not a Marxist in the sense of a socio-political theory. (...) In that sense I never was a Marxist. But I was not an anti-Marxist either (R XIX, p. 211).

Taking Marx seriously *only* as a philosopher, he appreciated him on many points, affirming that the foundations of contemporary philosophical thought lie in Nietzsche, Freud ... and Marx,³⁷ and incorporated Marxist notions in his own philosophy, for example in his well-known ‘Analiz soznaniya v rabotakh Marksa’ (1968).³⁸ In this text, Mamardašvili is not engaged in the ‘creative development of the philosophy of Marxism–Leninism’, but writes as an independent thinker who develops a key notion of Marxist thought ... which was precisely what Soviet philosophers were not supposed to do.

There is a pitfall here: the fact that there was something undeniably heroic about philosophers such as Il’enkov or Mamardašvili should not incline us to ‘exalt’ their philosophy as such. When the given philosophical culture is there, foremostly, to ‘empêcher la pensée’, those who try to keep philosophy alive become heroes by profession.³⁹ Philosophical thought presupposes freedom, and where freedom is under attack, philosophers are prone to become freedom fighters. At the same time, however, freedom of thought, both ‘objectively’ and ‘subjectively’ is the necessary, not the sufficient condition of interesting philosophy. I am of the opinion therefore, that one should not confuse Mamardašvili’s role and status as a fighter for freedom and civil society with his contribution to philosophy. They do not coincide, but nor can they be wholly separated. Mamardašvili’s ‘decision to be

free' led him to a project of reviving philosophy as free thought and questioning: as such, he clearly stands in the long tradition of thinkers like Socrates, Baruch de Spinoza, or Vladimir Solov'ëv. A French friend, Jean-Pierre Vernant, presents his position as follows, quoting from *La pensée empêchée*: "On ne peut pas tuer la pensée, dit Merab. Même le régime le plus totalitaire, le plus atroce, tel que le régime soviétique, ne parvient pas à exterminer la vie, parce que la vie, ça défonce le trottoir: la fleur, ça pousse comme ça."⁴⁰

There is a second pitfall: a 'demonization' of the Soviet system, including its philosophical culture. At this point, it is important, I think, not only to reject any such demonization because an analysis in terms of good and evil fails to do justice to historical fact, but also to realize that the critical philosophical thought for which Mamardašvili stood, is not limited to the situation of a slowly dying totalitarian regime. Arguably, any social system and any philosophical culture display tendencies towards fixation and taking for granted which require, one way or another, thinkers and actors who radically question any existing status quo. Although he considered himself a 'European' and explicitly identified with the Enlightenment, his profound critique of the cultural space of Soviet society did not imply an unquestioning embrace of European reality. Dying in 1990, he did not live to experience a post-Soviet Russia or Georgia, but it seems safe to assume that, under present-day conditions, he would, on the one hand, have been a good Kantian, a cosmopolitan European, favoring the inclusion of Georgia in the European Union, just as, on the other hand, he would have continued to be a critical voice within society, exemplifying in his person the claims of free thought, criticizing all forms of national chauvinism, seeking the space, free from prejudices and prohibitions, where thought can take place (R XIX, p. 42).

Mamardašvili did not only not publish because 'they wouldn't let him', nor merely because he was a better speaker than writer, but also for reasons that have to do with the nature of his philosophical project.⁴¹ One of the best-known qualifications of Mamardašvili came from Vernant, who called him

the ‘Georgian Socrates’.⁴² The Athenian Socrates was admired and despised, appreciated by everyone who favored the free development and expression of thought, and looked upon with suspicion by those who represented ‘order’. The same applied to the Georgian Socrates, and it is tempting to pursue the parallel. Mamardašvili fell ‘victim’ to a hostile, even inhuman system, but we should not exclude the possibility that he would have become a marginal figure in *any* system.

Socrates, as far as we know, did not write a single line of philosophy – and we rely on Xenophon’s and Plato’s ‘recordings’ of the dialogues that he engaged in. The situation with respect to Mamardašvili is much more favorable: here, at least, we have both a number of texts and ‘real’ recordings. In both cases, however, we have to relate the thinker in question not to one, but to *two* systems in their complicated dialectic: the *socio-political* system as the situation of philosophical culture, and the *philosophical* system, i.e. the totality of philosophical ideas, doctrines, and systems in their interaction.

Mamardašvili tells us how, in his youth, he found texts by philosophers in a local library in Tbilisi, books that had escaped censorship and mass destruction of books (PE, p. 14). In 1918, an *ukaz* from the newly established Soviet government had listed the books of philosophers that were banned, including those by... Socrates. Mamardašvili lived his life in the USSR and was a living demonstration of the absurdity of a system that prohibited the writings of Socrates. He found his *agora* in the niches of the academic system, in lecture halls, and in interviews, being a constant nuisance of the established order. But, then again, Socrates, whether Greek or Georgian, will always be a nuisance.

NOTES

¹ ‘Verju v zdravij smysl [I believe in common sense],’ *Moloděž’ Gruzii*, 21.09.1990, p. 7; quoted from <http://www.iriston.ru/ru/yugooset/1101322999.php> – I am grateful to Elena Mamardašvili and Tapani Laine for this reference; more generally, I want to thank Tapani Laine and Edward Swiderski for their critical comments, which helped me to improve this article.

² PE, back cover; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine [EvdZ].

³ Ju.P. Senokosov, in P.V. Alekseev, 1995, p. 367: 'Prekrasno vladeja evropejskimi jazykami i ščitaja sebja kosmopolitom, M. mog legko realizovat'sja kak filosof v ljuboj evropejskoj strane, no slučilos' tak, što ból'sujuju čast' žizni on provel v Rossii.'

⁴ Bocheński 1961.

⁵ De George 1967, p. 48.

⁶ Kruglikov 1999, p. 69.

⁷ See Alekseev 1995, p. 367, and Epelboin 1997, p. 12.

⁸ Epelboin 1997, p. 11f.

⁹ Boobbyer 2005, p. 198.

¹⁰ Epelboin 1997, p. 14.

¹¹ Berry et al. 1999, p. 46.

¹² The quotation there is from Karl Marx, *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, appendix 'Revenue and its sources' in: *MEW* 26.3 (Berlin: Dietz, 1968), p. 474; other references are, obviously, to *Das Kapital*, Erstes Buch, 1. Abschnitt, 1. Kapitel, 4. *Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis* (*MEW* 23, p. 85–98).

¹³ Marx, *Die deutsche Ideologie*, p. 20.

¹⁴ Descartes, *Méditations...*, p. 275

¹⁵ The following interpretation is hypothetical, not only because of the hypothetical character of any interpretation, but also because the status of the Russian edition of *Kartezianskie razmyslenija* (1993) is problematic; the French translation, moreover, is not very reliable.

¹⁶ Descartes, op.cit., p. 277.

¹⁷ Descartes, op.cit., p. 275.

¹⁸ Descartes, op.cit., p. 267.

¹⁹ Cf. Ju.P. Senokosov, 'Ot redaktora,' in: KR, p. 5.

²⁰ For a recent, somewhat impressionistic rendering of Russian anti-Cartesianism, see Lesley Chamberlain, *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), ch. 8, 'Rejecting the View from Descartes'.

²¹ Steila 2003, p. 21.

²² Vjačeslav F. Ėrn, 'Ot Kanta k Kruppu,' in: idem, *Sočinenija* (Moskva: Pravda, 1991), p. 313.

²³ Steila, op.cit., p. 24.

²⁴ Berry et al. 1999, p. 82.

²⁵ Berry et al. 1999, p. 82; translated quotation from the Russian Epstein's (R XIX, p. 197).

²⁶ See my "'Civil Society' and 'Orthodox Christianity' in Russia: a Double Test-Case," *Religion, State & Society* 27 (1999), nr. 1, pp. 23–45.

²⁷ For a critical history of the concept of civil society, see Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (Princeton NJ & Chichester: Princeton UP, 1992).

²⁸ William Outhwaite, Larry Ray, *Social Theory and Postcommunism* (Malden MA & c: Blackwell, 2005), p. 153 and 159.

²⁹ For a discussion, see Hans Oversloot, 'Towards a Revival of the State as an Ideology in Contemporary Russia,' in: Gerrit Steunebrink, Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Civil Society, Religion, and the Nation; Modernization in Intercultural Context: Russia, Japan, Turkey* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 73–87, and Oleg Kharkhordin, *Main Concepts of Russian Politics* (University Press of America, 2005).

³⁰ See, for example, my 'Civil Society and Ideology: A Matter of Freedom,' *Studies in East European Thought* 48 (1996), pp. 171–205.

³¹ Motrošilova 1991, p. 461.

³² Cf. Vernant 1996, p. 601.

³³ I gratefully owe this comparison to an unpublished paper by Svjetlana Nedimović 'The Political and Friendship, in the Beginning: Retrieving Arendt's Political Thinking,' presented at the ECPR-workshop in Granada, April 2005, and based on yet unpublished texts by Arendt.

³⁴ Bernard Murchland was, I believe, right to stress the congeniality of Mamardašvili and Arendt, and this could be a very fruitful direction of further research; cf. B. Murchland, 'V krugu idej Mamardašvili,' in: Kruglikov 1999, pp. 177–197, esp. p. 189ff.

³⁵ Kruglikov 1999, p. 59.

³⁶ Kruglikov 1999, p. 69.

³⁷ Epelboin 1997, p. 13.

³⁸ Translated into English in *Studies in Soviet Thought* (see References).

³⁹ Vernant 1996, p. 612.

⁴⁰ Vernant 1996, p. 604, quoting PE, p. 17.

⁴¹ See PE, p. 19; cf. also Steila, op.cit., p. 7f: 'Diceva: "la filosofia non è soltanto *ciò* che pensi, ma anche *ciò* che *sei*" (...) Per questa ragione, e non solo per le circostanze che a volte gli resero difficile pubblicare i suoi lavori, Mamardašvili privilegiò la comunicazione orale e lo scambio personale con gli uditori.'

⁴² Epelboin 1997, p. 10.

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