

MERAB MAMARDASHVILI VS THE SOVIET MENTALITY

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Abstract

In the present paper the author analyzes the thought of Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili (1930-1990) in the context of philosophy of culture. According to Mamardashvili, philosophy and thinking is identical to life. He tried to break through the closed borders of the Soviet system and bring the experience of other cultures into the Soviet philosophy. Mamardashvili's thought represents an attempt of original synthesis of different (French, German and Russian) cultural traditions. He criticized harshly everyday life of a Soviet citizen. With his criticism he significantly promoted the development of critical consciousness in the Soviet Union.

Keywords: Georgian philosophy, freedom and culture, Soviet citizen, intercultural dialogue

Introduction

Dominant totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union prevented openness of thinking. This situation favored the existence of skeptical assessment of the Soviet (including Georgian) science and scholarship among the wide circles of Western society. This tendency was clearly visible during Mamardashvili's visit in Paris in November, 1989 when the French journalist Annie Epelboin evaluated the so called "Soviet Philosophy" in the very first question in such a way: "For the last decades in the USSR, the science acknowledged as "philosophy" has created nothing valuable".¹

In order to get the Georgian philosophy effectively integrated into the European scholarly space (and make adequate reception of its historical heritage), it is necessary to discuss properly the contradictions of the past. It is also of great significance to see how the recent past of our philosophy is evaluated from the perspectives of the Western philosophy.

From this viewpoint very interesting assessment is offered by the German philosopher Udo Reinhold Jeck in his work "Contemplations on Georgian Philosophy".² In his opinion, Eurocentrism has always been characteristic to the developed Western European cultures. However, today Eurocentrism is obsolete. According to the new perspective, western philosophy represents not the unique but just one important moment in international philosophical thought.³

In this context, Jeck pays attention to the following issues:

1. Successive attack of Anglo-Saxon thought which causes lingual leveling of philosophical discourse.
2. Contrary to this, alternative lingual discourses establish themselves with difficulty.

¹ M. Mamardashvili, *Suppressed Thought, Talks with Annie Epelboin*, translated by M. Bakradze, Tbilisi, 1992, p. 5 (in Georgian).

² See U. R. Jeck, *Contemplations on Georgian Philosophy*, translated by L. Zakaradze, Tbilisi, 2010 (German/Georgian).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46

3. Sometimes, Western philosophy readily created artificial barriers. Non-sufficient readiness of its leading representatives for the intercultural dialogue as well as certain arrogance proved to be harmful for conducting effective dialogue between cultures.

An illustrative example to this is the 20th century Georgian philosophy which remained almost unknown for the Western thought until the 1990s. The iron curtain that hindered the exchange of ideas between Georgia and Europe in the 20th century no longer exists but the linguistic, geographical and political barriers are still tangible.

According to Jeck, transformation of the closed space became the lot of the Georgian philosophers. They observed and traced the development of Western philosophy as well as intensively studied the works of the European thinkers. As a result, in the late 1990s new connections were established with the philosophical institutions in Europe.⁴

Merab Mamardashvili as a philosopher represented a rare exception during the Soviet period. The style of his philosophy revealed inner connections with the European philosophy. It was not accidental that he was called “Georgian Socrates”⁵. According to Mamardashvili, philosophy and thinking is identical to life. He tried to break through the closed borders of the Soviet system and bring the experience of other cultures into the Soviet philosophy.

The tragic nature of the Soviet person revealed itself in the resistance to the dialogue between cultures. In contrast with this, Mamardashvili tried to establish free thinking in the Soviet Union. He paid special attention to the problems that prevented free thinking and the process of dialogue between different cultures. Thus, it is essential to deal with Mamardashvili’s thought in the context of contemporary philosophy of culture and explore the philosophical theses that are significant in this aspect.

Relations between philosophy and nationalism

Mamardashvili touched this problem in one of his interviews.⁶ In his opinion, the existence of national philosophy is impossible. It is necessary to use the word “national” reasonably and define its meaning. Philosopher is a human being who represents certain nation but he/she is not determined by his/her nationality. Mamardashvili pointed to the destructive influence of “narrow nationalism”. “The truth is above the motherland!” – This is the phrase because of which he was fiercely attacked by Georgian nationalists. He wrote: “I am fighting not for the Georgian language but for whatever can be said in Georgian. I do not need faith, I need freedom of consciousness!” In his viewpoint, the idea of enlightenment was replaced by patriotism that proved to be fateful for the process of state-building in Georgia.

In the 1980s, while analyzing national movement in Georgia and the Baltic countries, Mamardashvili talked about modernity and civic society issues. According to him, classical European way towards modernity began from the formation of nation-states. After settling national problems, these societies transformed themselves into multinational societies.⁷ However, in the Soviet Union the project of modernity was not accomplished. Moreover, the bloody history of the Soviet socialism in its content and form was the main enemy of civic society.⁸

⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

⁵ See J. P. Vernant, “Georgian Socrates”, translated by M. Kharbedia, *Arili*, 14 (2000), pp. 6-8 (in Georgian).

⁶ See M. Mamardashvili, “Solitude is my profession...”, *Spring*, 1990 (in Russian): <http://www.philosophy.ru/library/mmk/odinoch.html> (Accessed 10.03.2014)

⁷ See M. Mamardashvili, “Interview for Newspaper *le Monde*”, (1990, # 24), translated by D. Labuchidze, in: M. Mamardashvili, *Topology of Consciousness. Lectures. Papers. Interviews. Articles*, Tbilisi, 2011, p. 253 (in Georgian).

⁸ See M. Mamardashvili, “Reality and Perspectives in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union”, translated by D. Labuchidze, in: M. Mamardashvili, *Topology of Consciousness*, pp. 213-215 (in Georgian).

Mentality of a Soviet citizen

Mamardashvili dated the origin of the Soviet mentality to 1917: in this period the Soviet Union “jumped out from the history”.⁹ A Soviet citizen was characterized by “wretched thinking” and “risk of non-existence”: “we have been nodding for so long that today we should learn anew how to distinguish life from death, reality from dream [...] Diminished in the Soviet way and without any energy we lost the ability to understand the politics [...]; unreality of things and zombie-like nature of humans has become the rule of life”.¹⁰ According to Mamardashvili, the results of the totalitarian regime and deplorable impact results of Marxism-Leninism on human thinking are following: (a) Totalitarian system managed to stop all the types of mental activity. Others (party bureaucrats) were thinking instead of Soviet citizens and the “seeming reality” was created with seeming problems, false personalities, ghosts in terms of Plato and dead images lacking real existence.¹¹ (b) The Soviet system was indispensable from the corresponding ideology; the goal of “extremely simplified concept” of Marxism-Leninism was “pressing the whole world into one small head”, “in that semi-atrophied brain which has never thought before”.¹² What can be more uncomfortable for a person who strives to think? “I was burnt alive within my copper armor. I was burning within what I felt and thought for everything had already been thought on my behalf”.¹³ For Mamardashvili, self-determination was resistance towards the so called “black tunnel” in which Soviet people had to live without life. This hindered development of free thinking and intercultural dialogue.

Intercultural Dialogue

The accomplishment of this dialogue requires the study and synthesis of manifold strategies of different cultures. Mamardashvili’s philosophical practice is a good illustrative example for this: his thought represents an attempt of original synthesis of different (French, German and Russian) cultural traditions. Especially important and fruitful for Mamardashvili was the dialogue with the French culture: by studying French philosophers he discovered “French style” of living and thinking which gave him impetus for his philosophical practice.

According to Mamardashvili, the essential problem of culture consists in an attempt to transform humans. Human beings need proper value-orientation in order to abandon blind faith in authorities and to become responsible citizens. In this respect Mamardashvili’s reasoning is in accordance with the founding principles of the European Enlightenment which assert individual activity and primacy of reason.¹⁴

Integrating Power of Thinking and Freedom

Mamardashvili’s ultimate goal was to explore the “roots of thinking”. Philosophizing constitutes the core of thinking. It is the commonness of philosophical reasoning that deserves special attention. The most reliable foundation is the “ability to think independently” which constitutes the inner freedom of a human being. Philosophy should turn petrified and motionless mental images into the dynamic process of thinking. For Mamardashvili, the embodiment of such philosophy is the image of Prometheus who more than once deserved the attention of philosophers (for instance, of Marx): “Prometheus,

⁹ See M. Mamardashvili, *Supressed Thought*, p. 6.

¹⁰ See M. Mamardashvili, “Living in Line with Time”, translated by D. Labuchidze, *Arili*, 14 (2000), p. 2 (in Georgian).

¹¹ J. P. Vernant, *Georgian Socrates*, p. 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ M. Mamardashvili, *Supressed Thought*, p. 24.

¹⁴ M. Mamardashvili, “Thought within Cultural Space”, in: M. Mamardashvili, *Topology of Consciousness*, pp. 306-307.

chained to the Caucasus is the symbol of philosophy, the first philosopher; he is the ardent state of consciousness [...] radiance that burns your hands; it is a burning existence!”¹⁵

“Image of the Enemy” in the Soviet Mentality

Mamardashvili considered the notion of “image of the Enemy” as a typical Soviet phenomenon. The phrases like “Enemy of the People” and “Traitor of the Nation” are the reflection of the Soviet mentality.¹⁶ He analyzed the phenomenon of “Image of the Enemy” in the Soviet mentality and stressed its destructive and negative impact. *Enemy is an incarnation of something that is rooted within individual as a weakness.* In this context the debates on “National Identity” needs to be analyzed anew together with the thesis according to which the “Image of the Enemy” has been one of the most important constructing elements in the formation of national identity”.¹⁷ Fear against the *Other* and tendencies to get completely isolated from it prevents intercultural dialogue and is conducive to political and cultural conflicts. “Culture [...] can be defined as a form, skill and ability with the help of which humans can coexist and act in such situations that contain unidentified elements. Culture is a reasonable and rational reaction against the unknown”.¹⁸ It is remarkable that in the “Unknown” there is always something that is permanently under the quest. Culture, in this case, is at the same time “the form of being-free against the unknown; it is air through which to breathe”¹⁹. Therefore, the true essence of culture is freedom.

Conclusion

Mamardashvili harshly criticized everyday life of a Soviet citizen. With his criticism he significantly promoted the development of critical consciousness in the Soviet Union. At the same time, this line of thinking gave strong impetus to the very productive research which focuses on “Soviet Person” and his ideological foundations.²⁰ Mamardashvili’s conceptual vision is focused towards intercultural dialogue and openness; therefore, it is of great importance to develop further this line of thought in order to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between different cultures.

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¹⁵ See M. Mamardashvili, “Living in Line with Time”, p. 4.

¹⁶ See. M. Mamardashvili, *Talks on Philosophy. Lectures*, Tbilisi, 1992, pp. 196-197 (in Georgian).

¹⁷ See T. Babuadze, “Applying the *Image of Enemy* for Creation of National Identity”, *Tskheli Shokoladi*, March, No. 58 (2010), pp. 74-79; 110-111 (in Georgian).

¹⁸ See M. Mamardashvili, *Talks on Philosophy*, p. 198.

¹⁹ See M. Mamardashvili, *Reality and Perspectives in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union*, p. 222

²⁰ See T. Iremadze, (ed.), *European Responsibility. Dedicated to the 80th Anniversary of Merab Mamardashvili*, Tbilisi, 2011 (in Georgian); V. Kruglikov, (ed), *Kongenial’nost’ mysli: O filosofo Merabe Mamardashvili (Congeniality of Thought: On the Philosopher Merab Mamardashvili)*, Moscow, 1999 (in Russian); A. Piatigorsky, *Izbrannie trudi [Selected Works]*, Moscow, 1996 (in Russian).

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