



## Guest editor's preface

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The idea for this collection of essays originated from a rare and friendly correspondence with Edward Swiderski—a widely talented man of astounding erudition. Once, while discussing a procedural issue in one of our letters, the name of Merab Mamardashvili suddenly cropped up. Edward ironically inquired, “are they still merely singing his praises in Russia, or are there those who are taking a more critical approach?” My lengthy answer concluded with an unexpected proposal: “why don’t we prepare a separate issue in which authors of different views and from different schools of thought are included, so that we can all share our visions of Mamardashvili’s legacy?” This idea proved to be decisive. I immediately began to gather a team of authors, discussed the paper topics and the focus, and finally, after a year of intensive work, this issue, dedicated to the philosophical legacy of Merab Mamardashvili, is now ready. The new editor of the journal, Marina Bykova, has not only provided us with invaluable editorial assistance but has also shown genuine friendship while preparing the issue.

I will not describe each separate article of this issue, but rather will attempt to answer the question that Edward asked me a year ago. In effect he asked me about the attitude towards Mamardashvili’s legacy in contemporary Russia: one that can be characterized as very ambivalent. Tentatively people can be separated into two groups. The first group consists of unequivocal followers of Merab Mamardashvili, many of whom are not actively involved in philosophy. Among them, for example, are psychologists and even natural scientists (most notably, physicists) who are interested in philosophical issues. Logicians often idolize Mamardashvili in a very peculiar way. They claim that his published lectures are so remarkable that no logical analysis can be applied to his work, and that it needs to be enjoyed like poetry. Those in the second group are very critically disposed to our protagonist. It is not surprising that those who judge Mamardashvili most seriously are professional philosophers. It is well known that philosopher’s approach to the reality is critical; therefore it seems reasonable to expect that philosophers would be critical towards other theories, including Mamardashvili’s. But it seems that the critical attitude towards Mamardashvili’s philosophy has slightly different motivation. The common

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root of this criticism is not to be found in Mamardashvili's philosophy, nor in his image, nor even in reception of his ideas but in the very situation with philosophy in contemporary Russia.

Mamardashvili's voice was always unique. He always philosophized and spoke for himself by choosing his own path, not necessarily that of his interlocutors, be they his colleagues, students, or the famous philosophers, such as Descartes and Kant. Indeed, Mamardashvili was not accepted into the community of "official" Soviet philosophy," which at that time was nothing else but orthodox Marxism. And, this should not come as a surprise: many genuine philosophers of the Soviet era suffered the same fate.

Mamardashvili's boldness in constructing philosophical worlds and intuitions is rather astounding. He calls on others to become "founders of discursivity" (Foucault 1996, pp. 45–50), as he himself was, and to proceed from the fact that the history of thought is fundamentally incomplete. He repeatedly stated that past philosophical theories are reflections with open finales, invitations to dialogue for those who think independently. For Mamardashvili the history of philosophy is an ongoing process. Therefore, we can experiment with its results and develop a personal understanding of it. And here once again we hear the eternal call of the philosopher to think and speak for oneself.

Mamardashvili repeatedly returned to the Socratic truth that philosophical knowledge is not a collection of facts and cannot be grasped as patterns of information. Philosophy is always a question of understanding and not the reproduction of something previously understood. Any philosophical utterance may mean a great deal or signify nothing at all, depending on how someone understands it. Philosophical statements are more like triggers to thought than bits of information. It follows then that philosophy cannot be taught or learned as a technical skill: "only by thinking and practicing the ability to question and distinguish on one's own, is one able to discover philosophy" (Mamardashvili 2000, p. 156). Philosophy becomes not only the "acquisition of knowledge" or the "result of learning" but also something experienced in the very profundity of individual thought. This is why Mamardashvili had to speak in long and strange approximations and find a way of accessing thought so that one might arrive there by oneself and bring another consciousness to it. The philosophical terms or concepts themselves are simply markers for our thoughts so as to keep one's orientation and memory of the journey.

It follows that the fruits of free experimentation with the ideas of others, will nearly always be one's individual discoveries. They will open up new opportunities for thought, intellectual self-realization and culture. Philosophical thinking for Mamardashvili is a memorandum of free thought.

But is there not a danger here, alluded to by Mamardashvili's critics? If each thinks as they please, then do we not arrive at a chaotic jumble of thoughts and views? What has happened to the strict disciplinary frameworks of philosophy? How does it preserve its identity? Mamardashvili hastens to reassure those assailed by such doubts. In fact, an intellectual independence and freedom of thought are needed for eventually grasping what could 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 the path of proper thinking, then, most

likely, we shall be on the same path as Plato, Kant or Descartes. Thoughts that are useful for understanding are not numerous. But one can only understand them through one's own thoughts, those thoughts to which one comes to oneself. The space of philosophical thought, for all the apparent systems and approaches, is not so variegated. It is a rather uniform one, representing a continuum of individual acts of understanding universal truths. It is another matter to consider that those truths can only be arrived at when the thinker travels the path towards their realization. As a result, there is no reason to fear the variegation and discordances of free experimentation with philosophical "ideals." Starting one's path from different points of understanding, we, growing closer along this path, eventually encounter each other at the summit.

From this perspective, Mamardashvili's relation to the classical authorities of philosophical history is clear. He effectively distinguished between "real philosophy and the "philosophy of teachings and systems." The latter can be "paraphrased," but only real philosophy can be "lived through." Mamardashvili believed that "only in the points of individuation of acts of thought, fixed in the historical and philosophical teachings as real philosophical acts, does there emerge the complete ontological definition of the world (Mamadashvili 1995, p. 125).

It is clear that Mamardashvili developed a "real philosophy" and did not wish to be only a doxographer or interpreter of philosophical teachings. If he addresses the teachings of Plato, Descartes or Kant, then he does so solely as their legitimate interlocutor. It is here that one finds the particular nature of Merab Mamardashvili's well-known philosophical style. The philosopher is convinced that only a living (and not a contrived) experience can generate philosophical questions. One should search from within life itself for the answers to the questions that emerge through our experiences and those of humankind. It proceeds on the basis that the "connectedness of consciousness as a certain space for thought is a prerequisite in relation to the content of thoughts" (Mamadashvili 1990, p. 24).

Accordingly, the historical and philosophical legacy is necessary for us only in order to extract unique thoughts independent from how they were understood and presented by the concrete philosopher. These extractions form a kind of chain of semantic mediation of the philosophical tradition, in which each contemporary thinker receives a key to the ordering and clarification of their own intuitions.

But let me return to the issue with which I started my account. What are the sources of the contemporary philosopher's critical attitude towards Mamardashvili's work? In many ways this is linked with the thinker's candour, his demand for free philosophical reasoning and his willingness to act as an interlocutor with former philosophers. He doubted the credo of the scrupulous archivist of the thought of others. Perhaps such a position devalues the painstaking work of historians? Mamardashvili, of course, would have warded off such concerns. He demanded not only that the thoughts of others be reconstructed but also that philosophers had a right to consider these thoughts freely and without prejudice.

Despite these clarifications, in contemporary Russian philosophy, just like in Mamardashvili's time, there is still strong resistance to an original and independent philosophy. In Soviet times, it was tailored to the so-called "basic question of philosophy,"—i.e. the question of the primacy of matter. While Russia has always

had strong research in the history of philosophy, the development of new theories and approaches often met opposition from the dogma of materialism. The critique of idealism and the acceptance of materialism were the occasion for a historically based philosophical study, and the only means of bringing the knowledge of this or that “obscurantist position” to the attention of the mass reader.

However, the creation of an original philosophy in Russia has been problematic. One always needed to fight to promote an independent thought and unconventional ideas. The most significant representatives of Russian and Soviet philosophy—Evald Ilyenkov, Alexander Zinoviev, Alexey Losev, Georgy Shchedrovitsky, Alexander Pyatigorsky and others—are today associated with their confrontations with the Soviet authorities and openly oppositional stances (see Lektorsky and Bykova 2019; Epstein 2019). These names point to a period of Soviet history where the work of a philosopher was equated with the experience of an intellectual dissidence accompanied by perennial tension around the theories they had created.

Today we know that this was connected with the victory of Soviet dogmatism over critical (free) philosophical thought. The scale of humanitarian catastrophe from the 1920s to 1980s in Russia was truly terrifying. All that was intellectual, human, free and thoughtful was in danger of being eliminated. We still feel the consequences of these times. In contemporary Russia, philosophical schools are formed with great difficulty, and scholarly, interdisciplinary and research communication still at the developmental stage. Even today in the country there is a mistrust in the originality of thought and in the singularity of the thinker not embedded in a fashionable philosophical school or a widely acknowledged (in the West) philosophical trend. Thought, born “from experience” is either not noticed, or encounters an attitude of wariness. As before, a certain historically based philosophical authoritarianism is dominant in any search or valuation of truth. As a rule, successful careers are made on the names of popular Western philosophers. To present one’s own theory today might be just as risky as it was 70 years ago. As Nikolay Strakhov, one of the brilliant Russian philosophers “without a school” stated: if you wish that Russian society spoke about a certain idea, it is necessary that this idea was spoken by a German (Donskov 2003, p. 67). However, for Mamardashvili, the capacity and the will to think “for oneself” was the only condition of any philosophical work. He did not simply state this openly and with his own authority but did so as though he was embodied in a fitting creative atmosphere, as though his audience had come to him from the same free world in which he attempted to locate himself. He treated his audience from a perspective which presupposed their own free thinking. And it was for this reason that his own philosophical reasoning appeared especially unprecedented and provoked irritation. As a result, the only condition for the realization of his ideas and conceptions was his withdrawal into a so-called “inner emigration,” like into a space of freedom, where his personality and persuasions were inviolate.

Mamardashvili was not a philosopher in the Soviet sense. He not only taught philosophy, but he also lived it, following the maxim that for a philosopher living and thinking were one and the same. Because of Mamardashvili we know that a precondition for the creation of productive philosophical output is the permission of public thought. The joy of intellectual work resides in the fact that it overcomes “alienation”.

However, despite the problems of past and present in the contemporary intellectual climate of Russia, it is largely thanks to the great interest in the figure of Mamardashvili, that it has gradually become clear that it is time to move towards an open dialogue, to independent creativity and a respectful relation to another's thought without always looking back at the great figures of philosophical authority. It is necessary to recognize a significant value in the realization of these aims: the value of the uniqueness of each separate personality, and interest and respect for the other person. It is precisely from this demand that the most important philosophical intuitions of Merab Mamardashvili reverberate and it is this which makes him such an engaging figure from every perspective.

In conclusion, I would like to remark that all the articles in this issue were written with great sympathy towards our protagonist coupled with a sincere desire to think and speak from one's own standpoint.

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