
SYMBOL AS A MEANS OF COGNITION OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WORKS BY M. K. MAMARDASHVILI

S.A. Nizhnikov

History of Philosophy Chair
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Miklukho-Maklay str., 10a, Moscow, Russia, 117198

The article reveals the specificity of understanding the symbol as a means of cognition of consciousness in the works by M.K. Mamardashvili. It demonstrates the difference between his interpretation and the analogues existing in neo-Kantianism and Russian Silver Age metaphysics (P.A. Florensky, A.F. Losev, etc). The symbol of consciousness is seen as an “empty shape”, a transcendental issue, through which transcendence generating man as a spiritual and moral being becomes possible. Mamardashvili’s criticism of the naturalized theory of ideas (“Platonism”) is analyzed. The idea itself is seen as a symbol of consciousness, a unit of its description. The entire history of philosophy is considered from the same point of view.

Key words: consciousness, metaphysics, Platonism, philosophizing, spiritual cognition, symbol, transcending, transcendental, theory of ideas.

Merab Konstantinovich Mamardashvili (1930—1990) is often referred to as the “democratic aristocrat” and the “Russian Socrates of Georgian descent” [1. P. 24]. V.P. Vizgin mentions in his memoirs that he was famous for his “*conversation-like* speech”, and he was an “artist in philosophy”. Along with Socrates, he could be called the “incarnation of philosophy”, or even better, “philosophizing”, for he “philosophized out loud”. To Mamardashvili, philosophy was an “art of thought serving the art of existence”; therefore, he regarded its discourse full of scientific terms as secondary in relation to its humanistic goals. Returning to the ancient Greeks and medieval concepts, he was bringing it closer to wisdom: he was a philosopher of a personality, not that of ideas (Hegel), a phenomenologist, not a follower of Husserl. Like Heidegger, he saw phenomenology as an “accompanying point of any sort of philosophy”. He has always been himself in his inimitable discourse; “my experience is not typical”, he said about himself. We would like to call him a philosopher of consciousness who was developing a new theory of the symbol, which has not yet been studied despite a number of publications. Mamardashvili was also a critic of the Hegelian-Marxist interpretation of historic progress and the policy devoid of personality and morality. Today, the fact that the works by M.K. Mamardashvili are a contribution to world philosophy, comparable to the achievements of well-known Western philosophers of the 20th century is indisputable.

According to Mamardashvili, symbolism has a very special meaning different from the generally accepted Cassirer’s and Jung’s interpretations. It is also different from what was described by P. Florensky and other “symbolist” representatives of the Silver Age in Russia, including A.F. Losev. Mamardashvili interprets symbolism as a property of consciousness, through which conscious, spiritual, and moral life is possible. It is not a mere property (which can be found in traditional symbolism), it is a structure, or a matrix that produces meanings. In this case, the thinker means not the content of symbolism,

or merely its role in culture, but the symbol from the point of view of functioning of the human consciousness, its special regime and its condition, “Symbols are tools of our conscious life. They are the things of our consciousness, not analogies, comparisons, or metaphors” [2. P. 38]. Mamardashvili, unlike his predecessors from the Silver Age, implements an *abstract* or *formal* analysis of the symbol. He is interested not in its specific content, but in its form, within which, the “content of consciousness” is constituted and structured” [6. P. 73].

In his work *Symbol and Consciousness*, Mamardashvili solves the “original metaphysical problem: interpreting the symbol in the context of consciousness”. To approach it, first of all, he reveals the difference between the notion of a sign (“something that stands for nothing”) and that of a symbol (“symbols are *understandings*”) [6. P. 73, 83, 86]. What is the importance of the symbol for cognition? Consciousness cannot be comprehended directly, since it is always at least one step above or deeper than its own content is. The content of consciousness will never reach the limits of consciousness — the shape. If we assumed it, we would have to accept the possible expansion of self-consciousness to the limits of consciousness, thus switching from Mamardashvili’s cognitive methodology to the metaphysics of consciousness and the relevant religious symbols to describe this state, or their ontological recognition. In yoga, it is referred to as Samādhi; in Buddhism, it is called Nirvana. Such descriptions can be found in the spiritual and religious traditions mentioned above and in some other ones. However, they do not satisfy the scientific method as they cannot be verified. At the same time, they cannot be rejected, either, for they are not merely present in the tradition, but also ennoble man spiritually and morally. Mamardashvili sets the task of comprehending spiritual knowledge by excluding faith in the symbolic and ontological reality of the things literally described by these symbolic pictures of this world and the spirit. At the same time, he criticizes all the reductionist concepts of understanding of consciousness which deduct or derive it from any other things.

The fact is that consciousness cannot be cognized directly the way we cognize everything else, including our own *self*, with the help of consciousness. In order to cognize consciousness, we need to objectify it, turn it into a thing opposed to us, but this is impossible, because it would take another consciousness, a different one, to make a comparison, and so on, and so forth, to infinity. Plato implies it in the idea of the “third eye”, or an additional idea needed to realize the relationship between the first idea and the thing. Aristotle, in his critique of Plato, does not consider the idea as a symbol of consciousness, but naturalizes it, then mercilessly criticizing this naturalized representation. An idea can be either limited or limitless: any thing existent is perceived and comprehended in its context. An idea is just the light, which is differentiated into colors later on. In this aspect, all the criticism of Plato’s theory of ideas misses the point: it preliminarily objectifies the idea, and then criticizes the objectified image.

M.K. Mamardashvili demonstrates an entirely original vision of history of philosophy, metaphysics, and, in particular, Plato’s theory of ideas. In his opinion, an idea is “not something used for describing or depicting”, but something “constructive”, or “generating”. In this aspect, an idea “is not a thing... [it] is not present somewhere in a special

world, in addition to things. It is real in a different sense than the real things are” [4. P. 162]. Mamardashvili points out that the “topos”, the place of the idea, is not located somewhere in the space and time. One can say it is a spiritual symbol. This concept is not a metaphysical and cosmological one, but a regulatory and transcendental one (let us recall Kant).

In this connection, Mamardashvili writes:

“...The very idea of the existence of a certain ideal world derived from the idea of ideas was first introduced on the basis of the Aristotelian doctrine, though it may seem rather strange. Aristotle is the first to have a reason for such consideration because he found a place for ideas. He drove the ideas out of the world... Aristotle sort of localized Plato’s ideas, that is, he did not refute the theory of ideas, but quite an opposite thing happened, and it had an impact on the subsequent history of philosophy” [4. P. 164].

However, in history of culture, “secondary symbolism” won: the idea was objectified, and the “philosopher’s cultural shadow” turned out to be “more important than the philosopher himself” [4. P. 168]. This is how the phenomenon referred to as Platonism appeared.

Purified by Kantian critique, Mamardashvili supposes that ideas should be regarded not in a transcendent (i.e., traditional metaphysical and theological), yet in a transcendental (or, as he called it, *intelligible*) way, but implementing transcendence at the same time. In his opinion, Plato’s theory of ideas is the “first theory of consciousness ever observed in history of philosophy”. From this point of view, the idea is a transcendence, a “point through which we emerge from the world”, a “moment that seems to be out of time” [4. P. 165, 168]. We would say that an idea is a spiritual symbol. By naturalizing it, making it rough and external, we completely distort and destroy its understanding.

An idea symbolizes the infinite horizon of the essence of a thing. It is an absolute limit beyond and over which nothing exists and nothing can be said. Therefore, an idea cannot be considered to be similar to anything else, because it is the source of any principle of similarity. Hence, it cannot be perceived by its own self: one cannot see one’s own eyes, by means of which, however, one can see everything. In this regard, Aristotle probably criticized the Megarian school more than Plato himself, but in the text, Aristotle does not seem to separate these two different teachings. All of his criticism is based on the space and time coordinates of the world of sense that he tries to spread to the speculative world, thereby *doubling* the world. It turns out that Aristotle initially vulgarizes the theory of ideas, reducing it to the level of empirical reality, and then criticizes it because the speculative cannot be directly applied to the sensual: contradictions are inevitable. Aristotle is not so much trying to figure out what Plato was actually going to say, or what truth he attempted to express by introducing the concept of an idea; instead, he vehemently criticizes the obvious contradictions that were noticed and understood by Plato himself, and criticized by him in *Parmenides* dialogue. Was Aristotle searching for the truth or trying by all means to contrast himself to his former teacher to make room for his own independent thinking in order to find some other foundations and develop a different way to avoid the problems Plato was facing? Perhaps

both reasons are true, and it would be difficult to distinguish between them. Still, according to Mamardashvili, “Aristotle was a more average genius”, a “less tragic one”, compared to Plato [4. P. 161].

Consciousness is a concept as ultimate as God or death (it is true of all spiritual concepts in a certain sense). They cannot be objectified to be understood, because the process of objectification destroys the thing to be learned. Let us consider the concept of death as an example. We do not know and cannot know what it is. Epicurus is known for making this statement, seeking to neutralize the fear of death. In order to cognize it according to the usual cognitive procedures, one should simply kill oneself and watch it to understand the experience of death. But it is impossible by definition, for death is the elimination of consciousness. That is exactly what Kirillov in *Demons* by Dostoevsky wanted to realize; this is why he needed to kill himself to make sure that there was no God. Actually, suicide is an absurd attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible: consciousness. In fact, we basically cannot understand what death is. But, nevertheless, it is the thing most known to everyone: many people have already died. However, we will never be able to comprehend whether the dead are really dead; therefore, the theory of immortality of the soul is ineradicable. We cannot have a glimpse beyond the experience of consciousness. We can only artificially construct it, i.e. reinvent it. *Concepts* of the afterlife are assumptions every person (or every tradition) creates in a certain manner, but “death” is nothing but a symbol of consciousness itself. “Eternal life” is a symbol of consciousness, a shape, and the specific description of this eternity is the secondary (informative) symbolism, that is, speculations. After all, we have no mirror to look at our consciousness from the outside, and only circumstantial descriptions through “secondary symbolism” are possible.

In this context, cognition of consciousness is an attempt to awaken from sleep, “turn the eyes of the soul” from the shadows to the light, trying to turn to consciousness itself, its immediate symbolism, from endlessly shuffling the endless deck of cards — the symbols of what we are not supposed to know. This is where the critical pathos of Kant inherited by Mamardashvili emerges. We are surrounded by things in themselves; we ourselves and our consciousness represent a thing in itself, something inconceivable, though it is the thing closest to us. We take our images for our own *self*, and therefore we are profoundly mistaken. We perceive secondary symbolism as the primary one, and the illusion of perception for ontology.

In culture, spiritual knowledge is focused on special “symbolic structures”, for example, a symbol of unconditional love or pure faith, etc. Mamardashvili emphasizes that “faith as a real psychological state of any human being is impossible. It is as impossible as unselfish love. Nevertheless, we live in a field connected with these symbols which generate human conditions within us...” Both philosophy and religion make part of such “symbolic structures”, or “special forms” [7. P. 100] which allow us gaining the experience that we would not be able to keep in mind or understand without them, “God is a symbol of a certain power that acts in the world in spite of our foolishness” [2. P. 38]. Touching upon the symbolism of the Gospel, in particular, the expression saying, “he that gives his soul away shall lose it, and he that is afraid to lose it shall lose it”,

he writes, “The importance of this kind of symbols for the only possible mode the events of our conscious life can happen and do happen in is obvious” [3. P. 19].

Besides, Mamardashvili understands history of philosophy in a completely different way, through the theory of symbolism of consciousness. Starting his lectures on ancient philosophy, he noted that he would try to “tell the history of philosophy as a history of people’s single attempt to philosophize, though extended in time” [4. P. 9]. Meanwhile, he only uses the “empirical” history of philosophy (who said, when, where, and what was said) as the materials, an “introduction to philosophy, an attempt to grasp its specificity and the things acts of philosophizing consist of”. He is not interested in “dead knowledge”. The challenge consists in revitalizing the mental states concealed behind the texts. To him, a philosophical text is not an element of bookish knowledge, but a certain design of condensed meaning. The task is to take this meaning out of its “package”. In this case, philosophy turns to philosophizing, as Heidegger mentions. History of philosophy is not a study of philosophical empiricism, but trying to take part in the act of thinking recorded in the text. At this point, Mamardashvili’s point coincides with that of Heidegger, but it is not limited to that view, as he develops it further. The essence of this “further” development is that Mamardashvili regards history of philosophy and philosophizing as unfolding the potentials of consciousness that are constructive in relation to man: acts of philosophizing are a condition of life or conscious beings, they are their way of life. Therefore, history of philosophy is “recorded events of acts of self-creation of a certain creature that is not born by nature”, and this creature is called “man” [4. P. 11]. In this respect, man descends from philosophizing which involves specific acts of consciousness, like in religion and art, yet philosophy has its specificity: it tends to interpret them. According to Mamardashvili, philosophy seems to overtake, catch up with the reflection of consciousness that generated it along with man, myth (religion), and art. Therefore, philosophy is transformed into theory of consciousness, a science of consciousness — an attempt to understand the specificity of its operation.

In this regard, Mamardashvili demonstrates a distinction between the reflective content of philosophy and the historical form it is expressed in. Traditional “empirical” history studies exactly metamorphoses of these historical forms of philosophizing; consequently, it is interested in this object (subject) content which is always living and constructive towards man. From this perspective, he draws a paradoxical conclusion, “there is no history of philosophy at all” [4. P. 11], if we approach it the same way we approach history in general. He means not *history* of philosophy but history of *philosophy*, which involves only acts of philosophizing, not their empirical, textual, or other framing. We can truly understand any philosophy that has taken its place in history of philosophy only when we go through the same act of philosophizing that could have happened two and a half thousand years ago for the first time. Still, in the realm of the spirit, space and time are powerless. Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Socrates, and Kant are our contemporaries in this regard: their thought is placed in eternity, and if we, too, have reached that level, it means that we have met them, reconstructed the same acts of thought, and created a piece of personality within ourselves. Consequently, in re-

ality, there is no history understood as history of external philosophy, or its texts. That is, they certainly exist, but they cannot have anything in common with the acts of philosophizing registered in them.

In this context, Mamardashvili's statement that philosophy cannot be taught, for teaching it is pointless, becomes clear. The challenge is not providing a student with the "heavy heap" of the information stating when certain prominent persons lived, what they said, and in what way someone's points differ from someone else's words. The audience should be awakened to philosophize, make something happen within their minds due to thinking, or generate some meanings in order to "live their lives in a conscious and worthy way". This is why the lectures by Mamardashvili are so strikingly different from the traditional lectures by university professors of philosophy, who seek to show off their erudition or their knowledge of some minor details from the lives of philosophers and the development of their ideas. Mamardashvili's lectures cannot be merely listened to: you have to do something about yourself at a certain point. Listening to his texts or reading them requires some feedback; he involves the audience ready to think along with him into a "whirlpool" of philosophizing (Heidegger). In this sense, his style of philosophizing is really Socratic, it is true maieutics.

Speaking of man, Mamardashvili emphasizes the fact that we have to deal with existence, which depends upon the willingness and effort to be as existence does, but, at the same time, this existence does not depend on our efforts at all: we can make efforts to cause an act of philosophizing, but we cannot deterministically generate it artificially, entirely through our own efforts. But it can only happen if we comply with all the procedures of thinking in accordance with the laws. Like any creative process, philosophizing is spontaneous.

Therefore, philosophy is not a picture of the world, or ideological preaching, as Heidegger puts it. "Pictures of the world" can certainly be found in philosophy, but they are not essential. Developing a perspective of things in existence is generally a prerogative of science. The "subject" of philosophy is existence, not in a naturalistic, cosmological (Engels', or "ontological" sense, as it is popularly called: we speak of the essence) sense, but in constructive and creative terms concerning the thinker himself.

According to Mamardashvili, a philosophical text is interesting not due to the views it reflects, but as a trace of a "person making oneself", "texts are related to us by effort, not by the content of the views they contain", so they have "eternal modernity" [4. P. 12, 13]. Philosophical texts should be treated in the same way we treat myths. The essence of the latter is not giving us any concepts, true or false ones. Myth is a "man-shaping machine". Philosophy is a different type of "man-shaping machine". This is not mythology of the concept, but mythology of mind. The essence of Mamardashvili's approach is in the fact that he is not interested in *metaphysics of concept* (myth) or *metaphysics of mind* (the traditional "Platonic" idea of philosophy). He is less interested in the content of these concepts of the world (their falsity or truth) than in *what* they produce in man and *how* they transform him, what happens to consciousness, and how man arises as a personality, a responsible moral being.

To sum up, Mamardashvili also identifies two types of philosophizing. The first one is the "symbolic" one, i.e. using the language of symbols. Understanding this phi-

osophy is reduced to interpreting the symbols it uses; to do that, one should be within this symbolic system. A philosophizing man and a man eager to understand him have to share the same “symbolic space”, and be bound by the “same glue made of symbols” [5. P. 14]. If the stock of symbols is not identical, understanding will be impossible. This philosophizing is aimed at sharing a certain spiritual state, and becomes similar to a sermon.

On the contrary, the second type of philosophizing does not tend to express its own or universal concepts through certain symbolism, moreover, it regards it as an inevitable distortion of the truth to be interpreted. This type of philosophizing (based upon the phenomenological tradition, and even before that, upon Kant and transcendental philosophy) seeks to exclude all the symbolic points: it does not practice interpreting “secondary symbolism”, instead, it is oriented towards “pure consciousness” every sentient being a priori has. The task of understanding such philosophizing is not getting into someone else’s soul, intuition in the banal sense of the word, “psychoanalysis”, or deciphering symbolic speech, yet “overcoming the difficulties of one’s own feeble-mindedness”, since the problem is cognizing the “analytical expression of an understandable and clear thought” [4. P. 14]. This is what implies the “scientific nature” of Kant’s method, as understood by Heidegger and Mamardashvili.

This kind of philosophy treats the symbolic pictures of the world as a certain kind of allegories, that is, specifically as the symbolic ones. In this case, the symbols themselves are not important (the truth is not to be found in them), while the function they perform is. For example, the postulate of existence of God can be treated in this manner. Kant refers it to the sphere of practical faith. Mamardashvili shares this point, explaining that such postulates are initially meant to organize our lives, not to describe the objective or any other world. The same point applies to the postulate of the immortality of the soul: it is not a physical object; therefore, no definition from the physical world can be applied to it. Mamardashvili illustrates this idea, “But, nevertheless, Kant would say, I assume that the soul is immortal, that is, my assumption is based on the way I determine my moral responsibility” [4. P. 86—87]. The concepts of God, the soul, etc. are defined by Mamardashvili as the metaphysical ones, that is, not subject to the verification test. In his opinion, they are related to being, not to existence (there are objects perceived by the senses). The concepts he attributes to being are characterized by the fact that they do not describe the world and its structures, or the presence of certain items within it, yet they characterize *the being of the one who expresses such thoughts*. Such symbols or metaphysical concepts as “empty shapes” are required for generating a certain man, the second, spiritual birth, not for describing reality.

Let us return to Heidegger again in this regard: he defines metaphysics, the core of philosophy, apophatically: he no longer treats it as a science in the traditional way of understanding a science, a description of the world, or ideological preaching [8. P. 81, 82]. Metaphysical thinking is “thinking in extreme terms embracing the whole and including existence” [8. P. 89]. Within this thinking, *this-being (Da-sein)* is revealed. Furthermore, Heidegger constructs his *Da-sein* existential metaphysics. In contrast, Mamardashvili avoids any metaphysical constructions, while remaining entirely on the basis of understanding the metaphysical concepts as the regulatory ones instead of the

constitutive ones, in a practical rather than an ontological way — that is, he stays within the limits of philosophizing determined by Kant and Husserl in this regard.

Meanwhile, Mamardashvili explains, “the word ‘transcendental’ includes the core word ‘transcendence’”, though “philosophical reasoning excludes transcendent things”. Apparently, he means that, in transcendental philosophy, transcendence is practiced, yet there is no transcendent object. Transcendence is implemented “not for a thing, but for a shape, a symbol”. The transcendent has *only* symbolic value here, i.e. it is not affirmed that something denoted by the symbol exists. But if there is a focus on such symbol, if there is transcendence, it means that “something arises at this side of this focus; this arising entity is being” [5. P. 209]. Some kind of objectless transcendence appears — the transcendence without any subject. The entity that seems to be the object in “symbolic”, “transcendent” philosophy (philosophy of the transcendent) is regarded as a symbol in transcendental philosophy; this symbol is devoid of specific content, and referred to as an “empty shape”. It is a certain symbol without a thing to be symbolized, a demythologised symbol deprived of any notion. It apparently differs from a sign only by its constitutive power in relation to man.

Distinguishing between these two types of philosophizing by means of terminology, Mamardashvili defines the first one as means for describing the “transcendent world, whereas the second one is defined as emerging from the “transcendental consciousness”. The first type is inclined to interpreting symbols as objective existence, and can be reduced to religion understood in a vulgar way, and the idealist (“Platonism”) or naturalistic (materialism) metaphysics. The second type prohibits speaking about spiritual realities as objects: transcendental philosophy “refers to an object that does not exist, which is not defined in any possible way...” [5. P. 286]. However, this “referring” transcendence generates what is called human in man — the spiritual, the moral, the social, and the legal — and gives rise to man as *Homo sapiens*.

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СИМВОЛ КАК СРЕДСТВО ПОЗНАНИЯ СОЗНАНИЯ В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ М.К. МАМАРДАШВИЛИ

С.А. Нижников

Кафедра истории философии
Российский университет дружбы народов
ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 10а, Москва, Россия, 117198

Вскрывается специфика понимания символа как средства познания сознания в творчестве М.К. Мамардашвили. Отмечается отличие его трактовки от существующих аналогов в неокантианстве и русской метафизике Серебряного века (П.А. Флоренский, А.Ф. Лосев и др.). Символ сознания рассматривается как «пустая форма», трансценденталия, благодаря которой оказывается возможным трансцендирование, порождение человека как духовно-нравственного существа. Анализируется критика со стороны Мамардашвили натурализованной теории идей («платонизма»). Сама идея рассматривается как символ сознания, единица его описания. С этой же точки зрения рассматривается вся история философии.

Ключевые слова: сознание, метафизика, платонизм, философствование, духовное познание, символ, трансцендирование, трансцендентальный, теория идей.