The “Phenomenon” in Mamardashvili’s Phenomenology of Ontological Maturation

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Abstract

In the essay, I present the basic principles of Merab Mamardashvili’s phenomenology of ontological maturation. Though Mamardashvili’s thinking has been recently introduced to the West, there is still very little awareness of the uniqueness of his phenomenological insights, allowing him to illuminate contemporary philosophy’s central ontological and existential matters in a novel light. The essay addresses Mamardashvili’s interpretation of the “phenomenon,” which he exemplifies on rich experiential material from Proust’s novel In Search of Lost Time. The “phenomenon” is shown to differ radically from its traditional phenomenological interpretation as something that gives/shows itself in/for experience. Instead, the phenomenon is interpreted as an event that shocks one unexpectedly and offers a momentary opportunity to let oneself be appropriated by that truth, constituting the event of being human. I explicate the relations between Mamardashvili’s notion of the phenomenon, human transformation, and ontology. The central theme of these discussions is a new sense of human agency and autonomy revealed as the goal of transformation and requiring that one walks a path of ontological maturation.

Keywords
1 Introduction

Merab Mamardashvili, a Soviet-era Russian-Georgian philosopher (1930–1990), is perhaps the most intriguing figure among the twentieth century thinkers who, due to the historical and political circumstances in their homeland, remained unfamiliar in the West but have engaged their entire life with the questions of the so-called continental philosophy. Indeed, the uniqueness of Mamardashvili among the Soviet thinkers lies precisely in that he was able to distance himself from the predominant Soviet ideology and dared to teach what he himself saw to be essential and thought-provoking. Such resoluteness and devotion to philosophy, beyond ideological dogmas and regional characteristics, came with great risk. After a period of teaching in France, Mamardashvili was deported by the Soviet government back into Russia and was forbidden to leave the country for years after that. Always facing the West, Mamardashvili could not make an outstanding academic career in USSR, but his lectures became legendary both within and outside the Soviet academic circles. He was sometimes named “the freest man in the USSR”1 and the “Russian Socrates.” Indeed, for Mamardashvili, Socrates symbolized one’s arrival to consciousness, a performative method of exposing the audience to the freedom of thought as a way to initiate an event of thinking.2 That was precisely Mamardashvili’s teaching method, as those who were present at his lectures testify.

In recent years, Mamardashvili’s work has been introduced to the English-speaking world. The first book-length attempts to present his philosophy and the first translations of his texts appeared in the last 2 years.3 A special issue dedicated to Mamardashvili’s work appeared online in 2019.4 These important contributions afford both an introduction to Mamardashvili’s thought and an acquaintance with the particularity of his biography as a thinker who had to

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1 On Mamardashvili’s influence on non-philosophers and his nonofficial “status” as the freest man in the USSR see the first chapter of Alyssa DeBlasio, The Filmmaker’s Philosopher: Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).
2 As Mamardashvili stressed, he was not planning in his lectures to discuss or summarize the contents of classic philosophers: “You can read that on your own ... I am going to try and help you feel what philosophy is, be it European or non-European, old or new, censored by us or not.” Merab Mamardashvili, Ocherk sovremennoi evropeiskoi filosofii (Moscow: Azbuka-Attikus, 2012), 11.
4 Studies in East European Thought 71:3.
put himself at risk in order to engage in thinking. As I shall further show, risking oneself becomes the central axis of Mamardashvili’s phenomenological ontology. Only by putting ourselves at risk can we move from the ontological state of “stubborn blindness” to a place, a *topos*, in which the phenomenon draws us towards what *is*. It is this particular aspect of Mamardashvili’s thinking that I wish to address here. Namely, while others have shown that Mamardashvili’s thought can contribute to broad philosophical matters, e.g., of the transcendentality of consciousness⁵ or the contemporary discussions of the “event,”⁶ I would like to address the sense of a “phenomenon” in the foundation of Mamardashvili’s phenomenology, as it appears in his late thinking, particularly in the lectures on Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* given in Tbilisi in 1984–1985 and published as a 1200 pages long book that is commonly seen as the pinnacle of his philosophy.

To do that, I shall begin by explicating Mamardashvili’s interpretation of the “phenomenological reduction” and the “ontological difference” to display both the nearness of Mamardashvili to specific directions in phenomenology – especially Heidegger’s – and the uniqueness of his position within the phenomenological tradition. This task is not always simple since Mamardashvili tries to avoid philosophical jargon and often remains within the domain of everyday experience, one everyone can recognize in principle. As I shall show, this emphasis on the everyday experience expresses Mamardashvili’s conviction that philosophy (and phenomenology in particular) is a transformative tool that, rather than aiming at a scientific system or a theoretical explication of the Being of a phenomenon, attempts to bring our attention to the possibility of becoming truly alive in all that we do and experience. The “truly” in “truly alive” points towards the ontological dimension of Mamardashvili’s phenomenology – the only aim of philosophy is to bring us closer to an experience of “what *is*,” yet such an experience requires that we walk a risky path on which we must *mature* and first realize/appropriate who we are. Hence, in the second part of this essay, I shall focus on Mamardashvili’s phenomenology of personal transformation, which he sees as a peculiar process of ontological maturation requiring a novel understanding of human agency combining the classic elements of personal autonomy and the non-classic ontology of the event. In the end, we shall witness the necessary connection between

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Mamardashvili’s notion of a “phenomenon” and the requirement of ontological maturation. This connection brings forward the peculiar sense of those “things/matters themselves” to which phenomenology should help us return.

2 Phenomenon and Life

Mamardashvili opened the lecture course on March 3, 1984, with the following words:

We will deal with the text of the novel In Search of Lost Time, it will be our material, and the theme will be “time and life.” Why such a theme? For one simple reason: life is an effort in time (and that is how Proust defined it; a beautiful definition of life – when I encountered it, I even exclaimed with delight); that is, time is such a thing that you need to make an effort to stay alive.7

Mamardashvili then stresses that we all know intuitively that not everything that seems alive truly lives. Many of the things that we experience, think, and do are essentially dead since these experiences are automatic, stereotypical, borrowed, rationalized, etc. This “deadness” of experience corresponds to the fact that we are either engaged in experience in a way that does not allow a genuine understanding of what happens to us or remain unengaged in it at all. For example, we may walk through the city and “experience” the landscape around us without there being any emotion, personal relation, or engagement with these experiences. In such mere representing there is a diminished sense of mineness – all this could, in principle, be someone else’s experience.8 Yet, even if we find ourselves engaged in a situation and seem to experience our subjective existence through it, we only see what our “subjectivity” affords us – we have very little or no control over the way we experience things, even if the evidence of our failure to grasp what really happens is right under our noses. This default predicament of human life is similar in many ways to what Heidegger described as inauthenticity in Being and Time, yet rather than emphasizing the social character of the way one’s selfhood remains un-owned, or the way one fails “to stand by one’s Self,”9 Mamardashvili focuses on the

7 Mamardashvili, 13.
8 Ibid., 415.
subject's psychological and ontological mode of existing *that allows such a failure*. Mamardashvili does not try to remain pseudo-neutral in relation to this state of affairs – as if more important issues were at stake in philosophy – but begins with the problem of *real authentic life* and builds his entire phenomenology around it.\(^{10}\) Moreover, for Mamardashvili, the human condition is inseparable from the very beginning of the philosophical inquiry – it is quite naïve and dogmatic to think that we can simply address what *is*, be it the things around us or the structure of our own consciousness, *irrespectively of our own condition*. Namely, if we exist – as Mamardashvili argues – in a state of “stubborn blindness”\(^ {11}\) and, moreover, this state is an *ontological* one,\(^ {12}\) the very certainty of what we “see clearly” in a phenomenological inspection must be put in question. Ontologically speaking, what is given to our observation may *not* show what it is, not in the sense of showing something else, but in the sense of manifesting in a way that allows no insight into its ontological essence. Namely, we might not just mistake some phenomena for other but misunderstand what a phenomenon means at all.

For Mamardashvili, this is indeed the case and the problem with traditional phenomenology. Husserl’s main mistake was that he assumed that a phenomenon is something that we can *choose to observe at any time*.\(^ {13}\) We can, of course, choose to pay attention to some content of our experience, for example, a seen glass of water; we can observe it, go around it to see how its image changes as we move; we can even close our eyes and hold the image of the glass in our mind, analyzing it or comparing the way it appears to the way the real glass appeared earlier. However, in this way, we have only attended the *content* of our experience, namely the objective representation of a glass determined by some general structure (and, for Husserl, by a particular intentional relation). We have mistaken an objectified representation of a glass for the glass as such, i.e., took a “verbal” description of what is given to observation for the actual *experience* of the glass. Phenomenologically speaking, we did not reduce the theoretical assumption of the object-ness of what founds our experience, and thus rather

\(^{10}\) In this light, Mamardashvili’s phenomenology is essentially soteriological and is related to what in Christianity is called “metanoia” (a change of mind/heart). Mamardashvili sometimes even formulates the goal of philosophy in religious terms, yet, for him, religion only formulates in a particular way something that can also be said non-religiously. As Ryndin puts it, “Salvation is understood as freeing oneself from illusions and integrally recreating oneself as a free person” (Ryndin, “Merab Mamardashvili: the Concept of Event and the Post-Secular Situation of the Twentieth Century,” *Studies in East European Thought* 71:3, 259–276).

\(^{11}\) Mamardashvili, 27.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 273.
than attempting to grasp the event of experience which may have happened when we noticed the glass, we skipped the living experience and went directly to a given representation consisting of the common-sense description of what should have constituted it. What we have thus overlooked is “the essential” since, for Mamardashvili, essence does not reveal itself in the phenomenon (as something given) but originates or happens in it. Moreover, it is evident in Mamardashvili’s distinction that what we miss cannot be thought of as something that could, in principle, be derived from the observed object but is strangely unrelated to the object even though, factually, it is inseparable from the way the object has itself appeared in my world.

For a better depiction of this issue, let us turn to Mamardashvili’s analysis of a more exemplary case taken from Proust’s novel. Marcel experiences a strange feeling of uncanniness in the presence of a hotel closet. The traditionally phenomenological way of interpreting this case would be to reduce all the assumptions regarding the physical or the ideal nature of the closet and to attend to the mere fact of its presence in consciousness. However, to point out the phenomenon as an event, we are required to do a more radical phenomenological reduction than the one performed by Husserl. According to Mamardashvili, Husserl’s reduction only seemingly suspends all natural presuppositions. In fact, it retains the main one – the content of experience is not reduced but instead plays a role of a causal ground underlying the way I experience something. For example, it is the closet in the hotel room that makes me feel uncanny, or in other words, my feeling of uncanniness is bound to the closet as an intentional object. However, though the content of experience here is the closet, the truly experienced phenomenon is the feeling of uncanniness which, in itself, has no relation to the closet. Though Husserl reduces the “real physical” closet and leaves only a closet as an intentional object of experience, Mamardashvili insists that even such an ideal content is not the experienced phenomenon, not what Proust calls an “impression.” Thinking that a unique way uncanniness has momentarily broken into my life and caused a gap in its familiar flow is caused by something given in an experience (e.g., a closet) is already to assume too much. Namely, what Marcel has experienced, what manifested in his experience, is not this or that content that belongs to an already established and ordered field of objectivities but a shock in which something real broke through only for a moment by suspending the automatic self-certain flow of contents in the basis of one’s sense of familiarity and self-identity. We may imagine that our consciousness is always covered

with a veil – we are not in a position to always grasp what non-objectively shows itself to us, yet, since in order to be able to become a representable content of experience, the phenomenon must also be objectively embedded, it also offers itself as a mere object upon which we may project a meaning that sustains our psychological self-identity in the most effortless way. It is then the closet that causes the uncanniness (perhaps because it reminds me this and that). Mamardashvili, on the other hand, argues that a phenomenon is not given in the flow of our everyday effortless psychological existence but must be realized or fulfilled for it to show what it may show. Namely, the phenomenon is not some “thing in itself” that appears to me but is an event in which the ontological meaning of what really happens to me transgresses the veil of my everyday representational consciousness and threatens the security of the very psychological identity that feels safe behind this veil. While I expand on what “realizing the phenomenon” means in the next section, the first condition for such a realization is not to confuse the phenomenon with the content of experience. This difference between an experience and its content is what Mamardashvili names the “phenomenological difference” in the basis of the phenomenological reduction:

Proust, while dealing with impressions, solves the problem of phenomenological reduction.

When we are dealing with Proustian impressions, we know that we are mostly not talking about the content of the impression that is given to mental development but about the existence of the impression itself – it is, as it were, the impression itself and not its content.16

To say that the content of impression is given to mental development is to say that it is representable as some essence that can be abstracted, analyzed, brought to the imagination, etc. It is also to say that it may be related by association and calculative thinking with other contents; a story can be projected upon the content in a way that may serve as a detail in a defense mechanism of one’s psychological identity. The state of not really living, of being quasi-dead or inauthentic – presented in the very first sentence of Mamardashvili’s lecture course – is related to this opposition between the psychological and the ontological, between the mentally developed representations and the itself of one’s existence. It is the impression itself and not its content that hits me suddenly and offers a momentary chance to realize what is really happening

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15 Mamardashvili, 41.
16 Ibid., 286.
to me. This opposition between the ontological and the psychological serves Mamardashvili also in addressing the pseudo-problem of “other minds” and the real problem of inter-subjectivity and communication. The default human condition as a psychological subject is that of being stuck within a position which – due to the representable nature of experience – is free to distort and bend reality to fit one’s projected interpretation of oneself and the world as such. The so-called subjective differences between human beings are based on such self-enclosed psychological worlds which cannot communicate with each other, not because everyone undergoes very different things in life or understands things otherwise than others, but because no one really understands what one undergoes and what one experiences. The Cartesian self-certainty serves here as a ground for remaining within a personal illusion, confident that one lives and experiences without making any effort to remain genuinely alive. Proust’s novel then, according to Mamardashvili, explores the phenomenology of being thus torn off from reality and self-enclosed as well as the possibility of overcoming one’s own psychological identity and find a way to what is, that is, to a place where communication is possible.

Mamardashvili argues that engaging the very fact of the phenomenon rather than its representable content allows seeing a law beyond the given fact. The law is not to be deduced from the content of experience since the content is only an “excuse,” an accidental form through which the law appears. The laws pertain rather to the ontology of our existence. It may be, for example, a law that shows how we sustain the state of blindness in which we cannot experience things otherwise than we do – not in the sense of what causes our particular way of experiencing (e.g., a certain environment, specific past, particular psychological inclinations, and qualities17) but in the sense of what keeps us enclosed in any particular way of experiencing.18 To see the laws, we need phenomenological reduction as an operation by means of which we suspend the projection through which things (internal or external) are seen as the reasons for our mental-existential states. “The reduction does not say that these things are irreal or that they do not affect us but demands a shift of attention in which our existing causality-laden representations are suspended.”19 What can

17 The presence of “psychological qualities” in us, says Mamardashvili, is a result of a thing-image, i.e., of a reification of human existence (Mamardashvili, 525).
18 “The purpose of these examples is to warn that there are some upheavals of our souls: tearing apart the soul, disintegrating it or, on the contrary, gathering it – depending on whether we understand how the world works, or, in philosophical language, whether we understand ontology, or not” Ibid., 498.
19 Ibid., 287.
be experienced then is a “state as such,” not my subjective state but a universal state constituting the ever-occurring event of being-human:

The state is one, but it is plural, that is, in different places and in different persons, and it does not have an interior into which we would have to penetrate by an act of understanding in the sense of emphatic infiltration, since it does not contain any empirical human experiences.20

The states are not singular Platonic ideas but are events and are thus intrinsically plural since they have no other reality except constituting the “how” of each and every human existence, even if, for the most part, in a distorted concealed way. Each state is a peculiar ontological characteristic that eventuates as the “itself” of being-human, each time uniquely. The state does not have an “interior” in the sense that it is not representable, is not a content of experience, not an idea, not something that could be hidden in one’s subjective mind and remain inaccessible to others. It is also not a general property that could be deduced from what is representable and given to all. The only reason that it remains inaccessible, Mamardashvili says, is that it is usually inaccessible even by the “owner” of the experience; namely, it is unrealized. So, in a sense, the others do not understand me since there is nothing to understand – in my default mode of existence, the very ontological strings of the event of being-human are concealed and un-appropriated; I remain a mess of a psychological non-sense21 which nobody can or should understand, not even I myself. Indeed, the very term “understanding” is inapplicable here, says Mamardashvili.22 Still, the lawfulness that underlies this mess is transparent for someone who, in her own life, has already moved beyond this condition of being-stuck in psychological subjectivity. Then, something like understanding can occur in that space of personal growth to which the one and the “other” may belong. Proust, for example, has done this work, and that is why he can display in so many details both the psychological mess of his personages and give us the feeling of the law that governs it.

When Mamardashvili says that the state does not contain any empirical human experiences, he puts in words his own interpretation of the ontological

20 Ibid., 571–572.
21 Such a non-sense is, nevertheless, “rationally” structured around my self-identity thus still manifesting a distorted version of some state and allowing me to “have my own interpretation” of the world.
22 Ibid., 716.
difference, which he vastly implements in the Proust lectures but only rarely calls by its name:

Truth – a unique, non-verbal, irreducible, and unreproducible place and difference, what the Germans sublimely call *ontologische Differenz*, ontological difference, or ontological differentiation. That is, this is not the difference between one and the other, which we get by comparison, but a distinguishing differentiation of the thing itself from others.\(^{23}\)

While earlier I mentioned the “phenomenological difference” as a difference between the contents of experience and the very event of the experience itself, we now meet an ontological formulation of this difference. A universal state that belongs to the many as an ontological eventuation of the possibility of each time unique manifestation is not bound to any particular empirical experience. Only thus can it be both universal and unique. E.g., the way love opens up human existence or – in a subjectively psychological version – encloses one in the paranoia of possessive pursuit of some object is not bound to any particular content; it is rather a *logic* of love as such, a *logos* that gathers and materializes various experiences according to a specific dimension of sense. One can feel this logic, even if vaguely, by reading Proust, studying the Bible, or – if one is truly attentive – even watching a shampoo commercial. In Proust’s novel, we find an example of a phenomenon hitting Marcel in the form of the smell of moisture in a bathroom. There is nothing about this particular content that can necessarily lead to the sort of experience that Marcel has undergone at that moment.\(^{24}\) Something about the “logic” of human sexuality, about its universal *truth*, yet given in a unique form shaped by his own previous encounters with this existential sense-dimension, struck Marcel as the force of the phenomenon brought him for a moment into a place that was unique and non-verbal, encountering not some or other expression or a symbol of sexuality, not even a particular physical sensation, but a sense of how sexuality *as such* eventuates,

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., 720.

\(^{24}\) Mamardashvili emphatically prohibits us from thinking this case in terms of “association.” The subject, to whom the net of representations in terms of which one could “associate” something with something else is available, is not yet there when the impression hits me. Namely, the psychological subject finds itself already within the effect of the phenomenon when he tries (post-hoc) to explain it away in terms of some association (Ibid., 232). Instead, Mamardashvili speaks of a “metaphor” as belonging to reality as such, namely as transgressing our limited subjective relations and exposing an open-ended sense of things in the world by putting them in an unusual context. A metaphor is then not a mental relation but a freedom from mentally determined relations (Ibid., 503).
bringing forth the manifold of possible symbols, expressions, and sensations. It is as if the smell hypnotizes Marcel, demanding him to make an effort to decipher it without letting it slip into some familiar representation. It transgresses the sensation-thought dichotomy, pressing as a sensible thought, or a thoughtful sensation and enacting a momentary experience of joy characterizing an encounter with what is, with the novelty of truth, leaving behind the familiar world in which everything already has its own place. What could never be expressed with such accuracy in words has taken the form of a smell as a material incorporation of meaning which has little to do with what we normally name “sensation.”

Phenomenon, Mamardashvili says, is a kind of sensual supersensibility – sensual, but not as a sensation of any of our sense organs. In another rare case of being able to decipher the phenomenon – this time accompanying the sight of a belltower – Marcel reveals something about human tenderness and love, something that shows itself as an ever-occurring event which we are only rarely able to appropriate, yet which is the source of the aesthetico-moral joy of encountering the beautiful. Accordingly, the ontological difference does not mean for Mamardashvili a difference between an experienced thing and its structure, but, as for Heidegger, the difference between the event of manifestation of truth, i.e., of what makes up the possibilities of an emergence of a phenomenon, and the representable “something” which fulfills such possibilities without ever exhausting them. In its pure and radical sense, a phenomenon shows itself in its “itself-ness” and in it alone. So, for Mamardashvili, the ontological difference does not separate a phenomenon from its Being but precisely indicates that a phenomenon differentiates itself ontologically as itself. It cannot be experienced empirically in the ordinary sense of “experience” but is what Mamardashvili calls an ontological experience, something that cannot be experienced in a psychological sense but still is. It is an event since it does not follow from anything that can be found in experience the moment before, and it does not continue into the next moment of a psychological experience. It either is or is not, and it determines whether we genuinely live or remain absent from what happens to us, that is, whether we appropriate and realize the many sense dimensions of what it means to be a human. Such an appropriation does not merely mean that I fulfill some universal humanistic values but that I differentiate myself ontologically as a unique event of human existence.

25 Ibid., 222.
26 Ibid., 808.
Mamardashvili distinguishes the time of the event from both the consequential flow of psychological experiences and the a-temporal stillness of Platonic ideas. Instead, he speaks of a "standing time" within which we move. This is a temporality that does not run by inertia but requires our efforts so that we could move into a place in which we have the right to say that our past has occurred and that we have moved beyond it rather than have remained in the same existential predicament while the only thing that has changed is the date on a calendar. In this (ontological) time, stresses Mamardashvili, we do not really move beyond the historical atrocities of the past until we have fully experienced (i.e., understood) their meaning, no matter how many years have "passed." The event, he writes, endures eternally within a "swirling nebula" of standing time, a nebula full of thunderstorms and lightnings, amongst which we are moved by the event if we let it move us. The eternity of the event thus has nothing to do with the mere endlessness of chronological time but may be understood as an eternal tension of a topological space within which every movement is a transformation, a metanoia that transforms both our past and our possible future. That is to say, the event is not to be thought of as flowing from one moment to the next, but as a paradoxically dynamic wholeness of what we are only able to experience consequentially. We meet this paradox phenomenologically as an unexpected strike of the phenomenon that enters our psychological time only "for a moment" but is experienced ontologically as ever-enduring.

To summarize this section, Mamardashvili opposes classic phenomenology by stressing that a phenomenon is – by definition – not given and is not available for our observation. Namely, the phenomenon shows itself as the event of experiencing pointing out some ontological characteristics of such an event, namely the texture of what it means to be human, of the peculiarly human mode of existence (apart from any psychological, anthropological, physiological, and other representable characteristics). Since the phenomenon is an event of truth, it resists psychologically-determined anticipations and shocks our sensibility in a mode of suddenness and momentariness. The primary phenomenological difference achieved in a phenomenological reduction is thus, for Mamardashvili, the difference between the content of experience and the experience itself, not in the sense of a reflective image "of" experiencing something, but as the very fact, the "itself" of the event of experiencing prior to its automatic rationalization in terms of some available contents, of

27  Ibid., 150.
28  Ibid., 591.
what one takes to be one’s personal history, etc. As Mamardashvili shows in examples taken from Proust’s novels, such an automatic rationalization is a ground mechanism of psychological subjectivity in its never-ending attempt to defend one’s identity and sustain a worldview in which such an identity can live with itself. The everyday mode of human existence is precisely such a mode of interpretational delirium, in which one never understands what is really happening to her and never appropriates the event of being-human, thus never being able to differentiate oneself ontologically as someone who lives in an authentic sense of realizing the possibilities belonging to such an event. A phenomenon is then a tool for an ontological transformation, i.e., for being-appropriated by the event of being-human and living fully. The meaning of Mamardashvili’s phenomenological ontology is not that of a science of representable beings but of the way the reality – that which is – presses and pushes itself upon us as a truth that threatens our self-image and our sense of familiarity with an already ordered and represented world in a way comparable to Heidegger’s “angst.” Indeed, the very transformative nature of the phenomenon resembles the essential connections between the event and human transformation into Da-sein we meet in Heidegger. Nevertheless, using Proust’s genius, Mamardashvili is able to utilize the phenomenological subtleties of our everyday existence to make the phenomenon recognizable by all without the extravagancies of Heidegger’s language. The phenomenon strikes us as a thunderbolt in the darkness of what is merely given and illuminates, for a moment, a strange land that we must succeed to see. It constitutes a kairological moment in which we must do something to realize what “tries” to manifest as a phenomenon. The question, of course, is – what should we do in such a moment?

29 Hence, when Diana Gasparyan stresses that a phenomenon is what is left when we “put the external world in brackets” and focus on the realities of consciousness, it sounds too much as a version of a Husserlian idealism (Gasparyan, “The Transcendental Dimension of Consciousness in Merab Mamardashvili’s Philosophy,” Studies in East European Thought 71:3, 241–258). The content of experience is also a reality of consciousness, yet it also must be “put in brackets” so that the very habit to separate some external reality from the realities of consciousness (in order to then re-connect them in an analysis of an intentional object) could be broken. The phenomenon is not something that belongs to consciousness alone but is precisely the reality itself that penetrates consciousness not as an ideal object or a representation but as itself. This view is as far as it can be from idealism – neither consciousness nor reality are ideal, and it is indeed the reality itself that enmeshes itself quasi-materially in the enduring event of consciousness.
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Mamardashvili’s Phenomenology of Human Maturation

I began the previous section with a citation from Mamardashvili’s first lecture on Proust. It says that the matter of the course is time and life since life – that is true life – means “effort in time.” I have presented the reasons for Mamardashvili’s interpretation of everyday life as being more dead than genuinely alive and the role that a phenomenon plays in a possibility of an ontological transformation on the part of human beings. The effort of which the quoted passage speaks pertains precisely to the work of the phenomenon on us; namely, the phenomenon merely offers a possibility in the form of a particular demand, yet we must make a particular effort to let the phenomenon affect us. We must decipher the phenomenon and understand the law “behind it.” Yet, as Mamardashvili argues, this is a paradoxical task since any attempt to interpret the phenomenon would come down to forcing our representations on it, that is, to a usual activity of our psychological self-identity which has no interest in acknowledging something that contradicts the very grounds of its self-certainty. To solve this paradox, we should look into Mamardashvili’s phenomenology of human maturation. Maturation is something that we cannot voluntarily force but rather something that “happens on its own,” yet it requires that we do certain things for it to “happen.” Accordingly, I shall show in this section that Mamardashvili understands the ontological effort, which we are required to do under the momentary lightning of the phenomenon, as a letting-oneself-become-mature.

The default human condition consists in that we are unable to experience things differently from the way we experience them, i.e., we cannot choose to experience otherwise. One is hopelessly in love with someone who obviously does not care, all the facts are out there, and the reasonable way to go is clear – love someone else, Mamardashvili says. However, we cannot do that. Moreover, for the most part, we cannot even get to the point that the “facts are all out there” for us. Mamardashvili offers a shining example of a man whose wife calmly tells him on the phone that she is with a lover, yet he “chooses” to take it as a joke. Though this may be a radical example of “stubborn blindness,” it is exemplary of the way we project a particular reality and are only able to make sense of what happens to us in terms that fit this projection. Mamardashvili speaks about the courage needed to face reality, yet such courage cannot be taken as a choice that one makes among various available possibilities – one can’t choose to be courageous since what we commonly understand by “choice” belongs to the psychological level on which we are presented with determinate possibilities, not in the sense of being fully transparent and clear, but in the sense of belonging to our world, to what can show up in our world as a
meaningful option. Nevertheless, the needed courage is precisely what would push us beyond such a world of available choices. The man in Mamardashvili’s example would have to renounce his entire world in order to acknowledge the shocking truth that he has so unexpectedly encountered in the form of an outrageously calm message (as if it was something normal!). Such an act contradicts psychology, says Mamardashvili; it requires that something in me would override my psychologically determined mechanism of “choosing.” What is required, then, is a peculiar transformation of the sense of one’s autonomy beyond its familiar form characterized by a representational will operating with what is known and available for one’s identity’s self-defensive manipulations. Mamardashvili notices that Proust displays beautifully the fact that the most important things come to us despite our voluntary and conscious efforts, thus introducing a new category of change that is relevant to our states and our fate but does not fit into the familiar category of conscious change – an “involuntary change.” Yet such an “involuntary change” is far from being something purely passive. Here Mamardashvili pushes the limits of what can be phenomenologically described in language:

I should warn you once again about the properties of our language. Let’s say, in contrast to “voluntary,” we are inclined (and justly so) to use the term “involuntary.” After all, what do we mean by “involuntary”? Our amorphous states of mind, emotions, and so on ... some intuitions, fleeting sensations, and feelings that are characterized by the seal of involuntariness – this is not what we are talking about. It is just this kind of structureless state that is unproductive and is not what we call involuntary. But I will use the term “involuntary” because there are no other words in our language.

Mamardashvili develops Proust’s conspicuousness of voluntary mental activities as those are normally understood in psychological terms. We are unable to be courageous and to experience otherwise than we do because we exist psychologically rather than ontologically. Accordingly, the familiar psychological dimension of human existence, in which we make our own choices based on our desires, knowledge, values etc., is, according to Mamardashvili, a dimension of psychological necessity – what is typically called “voluntary” is, in fact, only pseudo-voluntary. Mamardashvili bases his argumentation on Proust’s

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30 Mamardashvili, 65.
31 Ibid., 65–66.
32 Ibid., 51.
various observations. For example, Proust describes the illusionary nature of one’s voluntary ability to write (a novel). The so-called voluntary mind experiences itself as having a method, as controlling each step; it tries to form a plot and thus must lean on what it has already represented, on what it knows. Such a mind experiences its own autonomy by putting forth its own criteria and rules. However, as Proust argues, one cannot write in this way – there is something involuntary in writing, something that must obey the moment and the way of creativity as it unfolds. It is this sort of “involuntary” that Mamardashvili intends in the quoted passage. It is something entirely other than both the merely passive suffering and the pseudo-voluntary activities of a psychological subject. The latter kind of pseudo-volition is what, according to Mamardashvili, lies at the basis of traditional phenomenology. By discovering its illusiveness, says Mamardashvili, Proust “has solved the problem of the phenomenon better than Husserl.”

It seems to me that I chose an object by an act of attention – no, it was the world that turned several times and placed an object in front of me. Therefore, Proust is very suspicious of all volitional, controlled psychological operations, which are usually called memory, attention, choice, and so on.

Though Proust’s examples are taken from everyday life in which our attention is always drawn to certain aspects of a situation while actively ignoring others, the suspicion of volitional acts is also valid for scientific and phenomenological observation. While in a real life-moment the psychological subject anxiously avoids what does not fit her self-projection, thus operating as a mental automaton, in a phenomenological observation of available objectivities, we are indulging in our not-wanting-to-face-the-real and let our mental automaton entertain itself with abstracted contents of experience, remaining safely within a dimension in which something like a courage-based will – as openness and a readiness to meet the unknown – is absolutely unnecessary. The experienced effort of paying attention to some content of experience is merely the

33 Ibid., 230.
34 Mamardashvili says the same about thinking as such. Thinking cannot be forced; what we may “produce” voluntarily is non-sense, a pseudo-creative play of our interpretative delirium. To produce a thought, we need what Mamardashvili calls a “harmonious machine” or a “text.” That is, something that has grown in us and can create through us (Mamardashvili, 612–613).
36 Ibid., 359.
way the pseudo-voluntary operations of the mental automaton are felt. That is to say, none of the mental operations that Mamardashvili lists are entirely passive, yet they are controlled by the psychological subject whose mode of activity is but a distorted echo of what activity as such – that is, on an ontological level – would mean. Ironically, a genuine agency would appear to the psychological subject as “involuntary” in some sense, that is, as opposing the commonly experienced way of controlling and applying already known principles, rules, representations, etc. Moreover, as we see from Mamardashvili’s application of Proust’s observations, such an agency is an event of spontaneity at the basis of creativity (e.g., writing a novel). Far from being an act of capriciousness, such an agency lets the laws of what is come forth and determines both the content of the work of art and one’s resolute (and sometimes courageous) action at the moment.

The “laws of what is,” taken ontologically as characterizing the event of being-human, are – as I have displayed in the previous section – what is being-shown by the phenomenon. Since a genuine agency beyond our representational pseudo-will is what allows these laws to come forth, the initial deciphering of these laws in a phenomenon requires that we already exercise such agency. That is, our non-representational autonomy can only mature if we exercise it.37 Accordingly, a phenomenological insight into the way one deciphers the phenomenon (in the moment of its manifestation) is also an insight into the nature of genuine ontological autonomy (differentiating me ontologically as this unique human agent) and its sense of maturation. Mamardashvili describes the moment in which the phenomenon strikes us as an aporia in the sense of an impassible place – something meaningful tries to get to us, something that we feel to be fateful for our life. Yet it manifests as something that must be secured from the immediate interpretative activities of our psychological representational automatism. The main characteristic of what Mamardashvili calls the “metaphysical work” of letting the phenomenon lead us is to “stand still and not replace your states or impressions with anything.”38

In the moment of the phenomenon, the ontological difference can be experienced clearly – we feel the sharp differentiation between the contentless, but nevertheless meaningful, event of experience and the manifold of our mental contents, which hurry to take over the event and to interpret it before we could

37 Namely, human agency is indivisible – it cannot be attained by something other than itself, there are no “half-ways.” It also entails that to “maturate” does not mean to add something to the total sum of agency but rather to become appropriated by the already eventuating event to which agency as such belongs. See Mamardashvili, 658; 662.

38 Ibid., 253.
be able to extract the meaning of the very strangeness that struck us. To be able to remain still and not replace the impression with anything is then a particular action of self-withholding. This non-action is nevertheless not a passive suffering of the phenomenon.\textsuperscript{39} Such a (non-)action, says Mamardashvili, is not future-oriented and hence does not reduce the experience to what pushes itself mechanically forward by the force of psychological desires.\textsuperscript{40}

In the act of such self-withholding, the phenomenon “slides between” the two layers of my self, i.e., between the non-subjective experiencer and the subjective projection of one’s psychological self-identity. Mamardashvili indeed speaks here about two “I”s – one that experiences the state and another that tries to understand it.\textsuperscript{41} The paradoxical effort of attempting to understand the phenomenon by withholding oneself from the subjective (rationalizing) interpretation and remaining attentive to the vague meaning that the phenomenon itself brings forward allows the phenomenon to penetrate the psychological subject and to be appropriated by one’s genuine selfhood in a way that facilitates its maturation. This “process” is best expressed in a Heideggerian language as it is not that some new “information” is being thus acquired – all such external information is inauthentic – but that, by distancing oneself from oneself, one first appropriates and is being appropriated by the event of being-human apart from all representational knowledge, subjective opinions, and pseudo-autonomous mental acts. In such a non-doing one as if cultivates one’s still potential autonomy by momentarily removing the veil of psychological pseudo-autonomy and letting the sun in. In this way, Mamardashvili explains, we let something grow in us, something like an organ, which then may transform us \textit{irrespective of whether we want it or not}. This something is nothing but our true self and our true autonomy, yet it grows in a place that must remain dark in the sense of being empty of all the “artificial light” of our representable self-knowledge, assumptions about the world, etc.

\textsuperscript{39} An example of such a withholding is remaining within the experience of grief without trying to resolve it by either distracting oneself from it or indulging in it emotionally. One can then, perhaps, learn something important from the excessive nature of mourning (Mamardashvili, 214). Christ’s directive of turning the other cheek means, according to Mamardashvili, precisely the same, i.e., one should refrain from hitting back not because there is some rule that prohibits it but because one then loses the opportunity to hold the automatic reduction of what one experiences and, as a result, to loosen one’s identification with the pseudo-agency of the psychological subject.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 415.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 251.
Darkness is made up of risk, of investment: one must take great care, invest, stir in the darkness, knowing nothing and assuming nothing is known. Then, if there is a chance to learn something, you will know. And above all, the reduced knowledge in this darkness is knowledge about oneself in the sense of the idea of one’s “I,” that is, about identity with oneself.42

To remain still before a phenomenon is to “stir in the darkness.” One experiences that something happens to her, yet it happens “in the dark” without explicit knowledge.43 Mamardashvili paradoxically calls such an experience “an experience of consciousness,”44 neither in the sense of a reflective look upon oneself nor as an experience in which one’s consciousness is also present as that which constitutes the experience, but as the other to all content-related noetic or noematic mechanisms, i.e., as the darkness in which one stirs without any a priori rules to lean on. This experience is existentially groundless; it undermines the very identity of the experiencer and requires taking the risk of self-renunciation. The essence of such an experience corresponds to the nature of Proust’s novels, says Mamardashvili. Proust asks questions answering which may testify that I am not real. That is indeed the case with our existence in its default mode – the phenomenon first allows us to come to a realization that – if we are merely representing creatures, that is if we merely mirror some objective characteristics of the world without being able to experience fully the meaning of what is happening and act accordingly – we are non-existent as individual human beings and are in principle replaceable by any other “representational creature.” Such an inauthentic identity is a mere story, a representation, a projection of a self-sustaining movie on one’s dead “body.” It lacks genuine agency. In a world populated by such pseudo-agents, wars happen just like rains are pouring – nobody really does it; it is a universe of subjectively enclosed worlds, each stubbornly blind in its own way.45

42 Ibid., 100.
43 As Gasparyan stresses, even mere reflection here would modify and distort the possible event of understanding/thought – “as soon as the witnesses appears, our thought ceases.” (Gasparyan, “The Transcendental Dimension of Consciousness in Merab Mamardashvili’s Philosophy,” Studies in East European Thought 71:3, 241–258).
44 Mamardashvili, 92–93.
45 Mamardashvili’s political criticism of Soviet Russia and other totalitarian regimes makes use of this idea. Namely, the regime can only exist as long as the social field is shaped by pseudo-agents, who physically move and “say words” but none of it counts as an “act.” I would extend this criticism to the general state of modern humanity, in which, on the one hand, the theories of consciousness which do not really require an ontologically differentiable agent are flourishing, while, on the other hand, almost nobody is aware of the
When one “stirs in the darkness,” on the other hand, one oversteps the sphere of given grounds into the sphere where we cannot know.⁴⁶ We stir in this dark point of consciousness and have no rules for evaluating our possible actions. All knowledge and rules that did not arise out of one’s own darkness are pseudo-rules and pseudo-knowledge – one must, for example, experience on the level of the darkness of her own consciousness that killing is wrong, without a “why” or a “reasonable explanation.”⁴⁷ However, this is only possible if one can separate oneself from one’s psychological identity by appropriating the gap created by the phenomenon. Then one notices that one sees in oneself something that is common to all, that is, something that is not “internal” but transgresses the internal-external distinction.⁴⁸ Such a “seeing” accompanies one’s maturation even though one cannot substantiate what one sees. That is, fact that genuine agency requires profound personal transformation on his or her side. After all, the agent-less views in modern science and analytic philosophy are factically correct.

⁴⁶ According to Mamardashvili, this is the real meaning of Socrates’s knowing that he does not know. Rather than a banal awareness of one’s limited knowledge, this is an acknowledgement that one’s true source of agency and values is a “dark place” where one simply cannot know. A “Socratic point” is then a moment when one must detach from whatever one is involved in (psychologically) and do what this point demands from us, thus entering a “metaphysical matrix” that allows a qualitatively different sort of states to arise in us (Ibid., 640).

⁴⁷ An understanding that “I shall not X” does not come from the ethical rule that “one shall not X.” Just as spiritual realization did not come to Proust by means of some abstract thinking but, for example, through a certain smell, i.e., through his personal encounter with a phenomenon (Ibid., 228).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 556. Mamardashvili emphatically dismisses the so-called “problem of other minds” in which one must infiltrate somehow into the internal sphere of the other. According to Mamardashvili, there is nothing to infiltrate since there is no such thing as “other mind.” Namely that which we can rightfully call “mind” is an ontologically differentiated event of being-human. Hence, if we understand it, we understand it as such, in any human being, irrespectively of the fact that it occurs each time uniquely. What is really happening and is really being-experienced and thought is never something “produced in one’s head.” The alleged distance between my consciousness and someone else’s consciousness is intrinsic to the event of being-human or the event of thinking (Descartes has already pointed out that we can’t speak of a spatial distance here). To appropriate the event of being-human, however, requires an “exteriorization” of oneself beyond one’s psychological subjectivity, around which, in principle, the problem of “other minds” is always thought (see Ibid., 557). In such an “exteriorization” one’s existence falls out of, or detaches itself from, the sphere of personal biography and one’s actual circumstances and identified with the sphere in which it sustains (individually) the ever-occurring eventuation of the state. This is not a detachment in mere thought, Mamardashvili argues, but a real detachment (Ibid., 596). Needless to say, this does not mean that we may telepathically understand others, but only that genuine communication is indeed possible without special “mind-reading” abilities.
Mamardashvili depicts the maturation process happening *without our knowledge* when we stir in the darkness unveiled by the strike of the phenomenon as an ongoing attempt to understand the world in a way that we could fit into it without *distorting it* or *reducing it* according to some given norms. In this ongoing event of understanding – constituted by a manifold of moments separated chronologically – one *sustains* that ontological dimension of sense in the context in which something like a rule or a norm can exist in time. Namely, since humans are not merely representational machines but exist in a way that can only be described as an ongoing event of being-human, the history of humanity is a history of *an effort to be human, an effort that might also fail.*

Ontologically speaking, there are certain sense-dimensions to the event of being-human which endure throughout humanity and require that we sustain their eventuation. For example, an ethical prohibition belongs to a particular ontological dimension of this event, and it only *is* in the next moment if it was *understood* and appropriated in the current moment; it does not exist as some eternal representation or mere agreement. That is to say, as belonging to the way human existence differentiates itself ontologically, it belongs to the very “itself-ness” of individual existence, yet, as having no grounds outside of itself, it belongs to the darkness of consciousness, to the *potential individual as such* rather than to any settled psychological identity.

We may say that Mamardashvili’s interpretation of a phenomenon as a groundless call for self-appropriation replaces human agency from its traditional place in actual acts, intended and performed by a psychological subject, into the sphere of *understanding* determining one’s actions as characterized by the genuine agency. Namely, since human agency must express itself as belonging to the event of being-human, only when such an event is appropriated in the darkness of one’s “itself-ness” as *an event of understanding*, characterized by absolute teleology, can we say that whatever one does is indeed

49 Ibid., 204.

50 In the default mode of human existence, characterized by pseudo-agency it is doubtful that moral judgment is at all applicable; one simply does what one does, necessitated by one’s self-identity. That said, we should still judge human behavior according to some norms (e.g., social, legal etc.) but should realize that all of us are still far from something like an ethically relevant mode of being-an-agent. See ibid., 522.

51 “There is an agreement of all on the absolute meaning of good or evil, on the fullness of its meaning, and it cannot be otherwise – if we know, then only in this way. That is, if we know goodness, then only this way: each person uniquely distinguishes himself with such knowledge – this is particularly him, and this knowledge is given absolutely uniquely, and, at the same time, it belongs to the many. That’s what I call an enigma” (Ibid., 541).

52 “Absolute teleology” means that it cannot be thought in relation to some pragmatic, rational, or any other goal. All calculation is irrelevant in genuine understanding. See Ibid., 661.
one’s action. Unlike the traditional interpretation of action as following some norms, an event of understanding is a re-configuration of the world and an initial determination of the terms in which a “norm” must be thought. A phenomenon is then not an echo of some a priori human reality but an invitation to sustain creatively the ongoing event of becoming-human. The understanding that can happen if one can remain still and stir in the darkness is a productive understanding. A phenomenon is an opportunity of appropriating one’s performative – and hence groundless – selfhood. In such an appropriation, one attains an understanding which is not limited to what already is but is open to what is unpredictable.

Once again, if I have understood, I have then understood that if tomorrow something happens which I couldn’t predict today, this is still a part of what I understand today; in this sense the future is not empty – it already is and when it is I am alive as an understanding being.53

The non-emptiness of the future is tantamount to the fact that I am not just who I am (psychologically) at this moment but have become identified with the emptiness in the ground of my selfhood, in which something like a spontaneity of will has matured.54 This is a “lawful spontaneity” as a maturity of my ability to resist the chaotic movement of life, sustaining the tension of my consciousness in a way that it may allow – I don’t know how – a renewed event of understanding. However, it may only occur if I make unceasing conscious efforts to remain fully present in what happens moment after moment, keeping by force55 the gap between my “empty” self, that is open to the unpredictable and my normal automatic self which already knows “what to do.” What I have understood is not some simple fact but an eternally enduring event belonging to a larger event of being-human; what is being-entered is not a particular thought but a dark origin of many possible thoughts.56 Rather than understanding in a psychological sense of placing something among what already makes sense, I understand in the sense of shifting my autonomy further into

53 Ibid., 685.
54 “[Authentic] Individuality is a face induced by deep emptiness” (Ibid., 635).
55 Mamardashvili reminds us that the Kingdom of Heaven is “taken by force” rather than by leaning on laws and prophets (Ibid., 636).
56 Ibid., 744. This is the sphere where we can understand other people as well. Namely, we only understand the other if we experience her not as a concrete and finished entity (e.g., in terms of one’s social functions or psychological qualities) but as an individual field ever “giving birth to more and more [possible thoughts]” (Ibid). A person is encountered as an event (Ibid., 757).
the “non-voluntary” sphere of a performative determination of sense. What I have thus understood serves me then: it is a non-ground of what will truly be the creative ground of my (spontaneous) action.\textsuperscript{57} The non-action of letting such an understanding occur determines whether I will understand the unpredictable in a way that will be decisive for my fate.

While in the representational interpretation of agency, the agent is, in principle, unnecessary since her actions can be equally described in objective terms (e.g., of neuroscience), Mamardashvili’s notion of “will” is a \textit{pure phenomenon} as it makes sense only in the event of its own work. That is, anything \textit{analyzable}, e.g., a psychological principle, does not require a “spiritual element” of individuality; it can function \textit{without me}, as indeed it does.\textsuperscript{58} Proust’s investigation begins precisely at this point of revealing that he is \textit{not}, i.e., that there is no agent in what he “does” and experiences. This is, according to Mamardashvili, Proust’s basic impulse – the problem of the authority of one’s states and actions in light of a \textit{possibility} of will. True will is then not derivative from some observed actions, and in terms of some available sense-structures, it is not an initiation of an act according to existing rules but is what re-configures and loosens up sense-structures allowing a new open-ended self-understanding. Paradoxically, it cannot be voluntarily exercised, but must mature (as understanding) and then eventually \textit{happen}. More precisely, “will” is an ontological characteristic of the event of being-human, not something that belongs to me as a subject or characterizes my actions seen objectively. When something matures in me on the level of darkness (of my “itself-ness”), it merely allows the ever-occurring event of will\textsuperscript{59} to come forward as an uncontrollable and

\textsuperscript{57} Some parallels can be seen with the Kierkegaardian notion of “repetition” (for example see Kangas, \textit{Kierkegaard’s Instant: On Beginnings}, [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007], 89). What is repeated in understanding of the unpredictable is not some determined law that could be assigned to the past content of experience, but the “how” of the fact of its manifestation, a peculiar ontological quality which functions as a condition for the presentability of the future (unpredictable) situation. Though the \textit{content} may be something that I could not expect, the very fact of its manifestation is experienced as belonging to the enduring event of my understanding, i.e., as something that can be released to its own meaning along the lines of sense-dimensions which my “former” understanding has appropriated.

\textsuperscript{58} Mamardashvili, 537.

\textsuperscript{59} Mamardashvili seems to offer an “ontologization” of a Nietzschean identity of being and becoming when he speaks of pure phenomena like will and faith as that which can never be fully acquired but – as eternally enduring acts – are always becoming and are never complete, thus \textit{requiring that we sustain them}. Unlike Nietzsche, Mamardashvili does not take an individual human subject as exemplary case of life which strives to enhance itself but thinks life ontologically as the living event or an event of living in which one can participate through the ontological effort of transcending subjectivity.
unintended event of understanding, which in turn characterizes my doings as genuine acts. An unrepresentable event of understanding is then a constitutive part of the act. An action that incorporates this state of understanding cannot be analyzed in terms of available mechanisms since – as inseparable from the ontologically performative happening of understanding – the very terms in which this action is what it is comes to existence only after it has been accomplished. The agent is not prior to the action but arises each time anew in it. For example, the empirical, psychologically, and biographically analyzable Proust is not the author of *In Search of Lost Time*. Rather, the novel is an event in which the author attempts to become that someone who can be understood in terms of what the novel first opens up. Proust’s initial “intention” must be thought of as open, as coming from the not-yet actual agent, an agent that first becomes an author of the writing while the event of understanding occurs and forces him to write despite his empirical inclinations. This process of the unfolding of will happens not on the basis of one’s subjective autonomy – this is not a Nietzschean will to power – but always out of what has been understood ontologically, i.e., out of what has matured as sustaining the universal event of being-human beyond one’s direct control and explicit knowledge; it is the shaping-unfolding of one’s fate as a path of one’s individual contribution to the sustainment of the “fire of Being.” Indeed, though Mamardashvili rarely speaks of “Being as such” in order not to objectify it as something that makes sense on its own and independently of human existence, what I have so far called an “event of being-human” is nothing other but what Heidegger calls an event of Being (or rather Beyng) as such. Mamardashvili brings the example of appropriating (ontologically) Pascal’s words that the agony of Christ never ends and that we must not sleep during that time (i.e., life is an effort in time). The Christian expression only catches here something universal, something that is open-ended in its futural determination of what it is like to be a living human being as an essential sense-dimension of Being as such; the expression catches something that may strike us unexpectedly (like a thief in

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61 Mamardashvili, 699.

62 This creative open-endedness is essential in the event of human existence and consciousness. Indeed, Mamardashvili even defines consciousness tautologically as “the possibility of more consciousness” (Ibid., 519). A sort of ontological understanding which Mamardashvili connects to genuine agency is similarly not an understanding of a given thought, but an opening of a possibility to think (determined in the scope of an understood eventuating state).
the night?) as a phenomenon⁶³ and require that we stir non-verbally, that is non-representationally and non-subjectively, in the darkness of our own Being.

The agony of Christ lasts forever. I can only get inside it personally – this is what I call non-verbal. This “non-verbal” is the common root of being-human: if I uphold my absolute “I” within this act, I maintain the root of the human as such, from which your life also arises, and all this happens now. In some sense, this is a worldview, or rather, a world-experience of Proust, determined by a sensation that there is only one life, that is, we are all given one life, a unit of life. And if we live, it is only as one life, and if not as one life, then it is not really life.⁶⁴

I repeat, the home of European culture is the figure of a non-verbal movement and – based on this movement in oneself – of the sustaining of Being by human beings.⁶⁵

4 Conclusion

I have tried to display the unique character of Mamardashvili’s philosophy as a phenomenology of ontological maturation. As a pinnacle of Mamardashvili’s path, the Proust lectures manifest such a phenomenology in the very event of thinking that unfolds in them. Namely, I see what Mamardashvili does in these lectures as a rare case of philosophical maturity, a phenomenon that draws us to thinking. Far from “philosophizing in an armchair” or naively leaning on what seemingly “gives itself” in experience and is being-objectified and displayed by the sciences as the only true reality, Mamardashvili courageously enters the most elusive sphere of human experience, one that is especially hard to illuminate and point out to his listeners since it is – as Mamardashvili says – “as if too personal.” Indeed, in order to follow Mamardashvili, one must

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⁶³ The religious symbol, as any other true symbol, is a “place-holder” that requires to be personally appropriated in our ontological effort of deciphering the phenomenon. For example, there is no use (or no sense) in the religious symbol of resurrection unless one has appropriated it as the dying of one’s psychological subject and a resurrection in a new, true life (Ibid., 163; 260; 324; 623). Importantly, unlike signs, which are contingent and only have meaning in the context of a sign-system, symbols are universal and inseparable from consciousness (Mamardashvili, M. K., & Pyatigorsky, A. M. (1997). Simvol i soznaniye: Metafizicheskie rassuzhdeniya o soznaniye, simvolike i yazyke (Symbol and consciousness: Metaphysical Reasoning about Consciousness, Symbols, and Language). Moskva: Shkola “Yazyki russkoy kultury,” 88).

⁶⁴ Mamardashvili, 165.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 622.
have already noticed something: a psychological tendency of self-limitation, subjective blindness, and an essential incapacity to “think one's way out of it.” One must have experienced on one’s own skin the failure of experiencing otherwise than one does. Or, at least, one must already notice – even if much attention was not yet given to it – that something like thinking, deciding, being-courageous, etc., are not volitional activities in the traditional sense of a representational will intending and calculating its steps. This emphasis on the “involuntary,” which is nevertheless a door into the genuinely voluntary, is what Mamardashvili takes as the essential intention behind Proust's accentuation of memory.66 A philosophical maturity is to see as the “matters themselves” only that which “truly matters” in one’s concrete everyday existence; it is to have an intuition that what is philosophically essential in “things themselves” are not “things” but their “themselves-ness.” As Heidegger once pointed out, the Cartesian self-certainty of “I am” forbids the truly important question – “Am I?” In this sense, Mamardashvili is closer to Heidegger in spirit than to any of the classic phenomenologists. Indeed, there are many parallels between the two thinkers, parallels some of which I have stressed here.67 Nevertheless, there are also certain features in Mamardashvili’s understanding of the phenomenon, which I find nowhere, at least not in the explicit form that they take in him. As a concluding summary, I shall briefly list five points:

First, the phenomenon serves as a call and a momentary opportunity for a personal transformation. This anti-subjectivistic position is a unique vision of the way reality, what is, pushes upon us by constantly transgressing our subjective projections of the already determined representational structure of the world. The phenomenon is not a thing that is just richer, more saturated, or different in any way from our representations, but is quasi-active: it breaks through in a way that may sometimes shock our existing identity and threaten it by an event of a self-evident, yet withdrawn and momentary flash of truth, one that is fateful for us, requiring that we risk our self-identity in order to let it enlighten us. In such enlightenment, one does not acquire some propositional

66 This is different, for example, from Benjamin for whom the theme of forgetting seems to be central in Proust (e.g., in “The Image of Proust”). Still, certain parallels may be drawn as Benjamin sees the reason of forgetting in one’s entanglement in everydayness and representational thinking. Proust's remembrance is then a motive or remembering the origin, that which is universally human in a sense that was forgotten and in a time that was lost and needs to be searched for. In this sense, both Mamardashvili and Benjamin bring Proust closer to Heidegger’s later thinking.

67 For an attempt to integrate Heidegger’s idea of an attention to Beyng and Mamardashvili’s idea of “work” as a path of ontological efforts see Kuravsky, Erik, “Attentiveness as an Ontological Practice in Mamardashvili and Heidegger.” Circolo Rivista di Filosofia e Culture, vol. 13, 2022, pp. 90:110.
knowledge but reveals oneself in the sense of appropriating some ontological dimension of the event of being-human, which distinguishes her ontologically as this particular unique existence participating in Being as such.

Second, Mamardashvili offers a concrete phenomenological account of human agency that overcomes the traditional will of a representational subject without falling into vague speculations regarding some mode of existence that is entirely “outside of the domain of will.” Thus, Mamardashvili avoids the metaphysical mistake of thinking in oppositions. Namely, rather than speculating about some mode of existence that would be determined as entirely opposite or different from the traditional, classic notion of will, Mamardashvili shows us that another form of will is phenomenologically available. This form is usually mistaken for a case of the “involuntary” because we are stuck in linguistic oppositions. Moreover, to fully embrace this sort of mature will found in the basis of genuine creation and the truly autonomous, non-subjective, non-psychologically-determined action, one has to walk a specific path in the darkness illuminated each time for a moment by the phenomenon.

Third, Mamardashvili gives phenomenologically grounded account of the difference between the psychological and the ontological within experience without abstracting the ontological from the contents of experience or positing it as a transcendental assumption. The peculiar interpretation of the ontological difference in its relation to a phenomenological difference, namely the difference between the content/object of experience and the fact/event of experience itself, allows Mamardashvili to enter the most subtle and illusive spheres of the ways we experience ourself as alive, conscious beings, not in the sense of mere psychological or transcendental subjects, but as the event of life itself in its universal meaningfulness ever-enduring as each time unique self-openness to what is other but nevertheless intimately mine.

Fourth, the paradox of unique universality is related directly to the problem of communication with other human beings. Mamardashvili shows us that if we walk the path on which we become who we ontologically are beyond our accidental psychological self-identities, what we understand is universal – one life, one human essence. This universality, however, eventuates each time uniquely and cannot be formulated as the idea of a “general human nature.” It is better to say that in genuine understanding, we get access to the event of Being-human in which we become identified with the creative emptiness as our genuine self and thus become released from the mis-understandings and the anticipations which block our spontaneous intimacy with the other. This spontaneity – which is rooted in Mamardashvili’s notion of genuine autonomy – also lies at the basis of genuine ethics. The ethical is neither that which can be reduced to norms and rules nor the capricious self-determination.
of the existentialist. It is finite in the sense that certain things are good or bad for all, yet it is also infinite in a sense that such “things” are universally unique, each time directing one’s behavior within the ontological sense-spheres of being-human.

Five, Mamardashvili transgresses the traditional distinctions between the mystical and the everyday experience, between the sublime contents of experience and the banal, even ignoble contents. Though certain contents are indeed richer with what may serve as a facilitator of one’s transformation, no philosophical book or religious object is special in itself. One must be able to undergo a certain self-detachment to let the “inner word” echo in the darkness of one’s pre-conscious existence. Otherwise, it is all vain intellectualism, aestheticism, and “spiritualism.” In this light, Mamardashvili’s thinking illuminates the ontological distinguishability of philosophy itself, of art itself, of life itself. Rather than offering one more view on specific philosophical themes, it points towards the philosophical stone without which all these themes – to use a Heideggerian term – remain idle talk.