

WHAT'S THE COMMON OF UTOPIA? TO MERAB
MAMARDASHVILI'S UNDERSTANDING OF PERSONAL UTOPIA
*SOROKINA Sofia**

Abstract

The concept of utopia faces several challenges. One of them is related to the lack of clarity as to how different views on what is desirable, may be compatible, whereas the very notion of utopia necessarily implies a certain communality. This problem, however, arises from a confusion between u-topia, a non-place, and eu-topia, a good place. If eutopia aspires to a picturing place which is “good”, for this or that reason, utopia may be seen as a no-place, which can be understood as a place other than given. Both of these understandings have their own shortcomings. If eutopia excludes multiplicity of perspectives of what is good by proposing only one vision of “good place”, in other words, welcomes singular without plural (Morris), utopia risks embracing plural without proposing any common ground for it to be (Kinna). This paper examines how a non-place can harbor common without reducing it to eu-topian elements, and we would like to do so by examining the concept of personal utopia of Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili (1930-1990), as opposed to social utopia (which, as we will argue, may be better understood as social eu-topia).

Keywords: utopia, eutopia, commonality, multiplicity, Mamardashvili.

Introduction

In *Introduction to Philosophy*, Merab Mamardashvili writes in relation to the word “utopia”:

One doesn't even need a deep knowledge of the Greek language to immediately perceive the inner form of this word – its true meaning, contrary to how we usually use it automatically. We say “utopia,” meaning something beautiful, unattainable, or something that may come true at some indefinite point in time. But in fact, this Greek word is more technical – that is, quite precise in its meaning.

*PhD Student at the *University of Södertörn, Sweden*.

Let us try to decipher what “utopia” is: “u-topos.” “Topos” means place, and “u-” is a negation. A no-place, a non-existent place – utopia is a world that exists nowhere¹.

Utopia as a “world that exists nowhere” can be differentiated from eutopia, a good place, either “beautiful and unattainable” or “something that may come true at some indefinite point in time”. One could argue that discussions around the notion of utopia can be – at least, partly, – explained by the difference of limits and possibilities that both terms (eu-topia and utopia) imply. On the one hand, striving to eutopia, understood as a good place, independently from the exact way this good place is understood, means following a certain pre-constructed narrative, where understandings of the meaning of at least “good”, “place” and “good place”, are already made. This ready-made character intrinsic to the concept of eutopia implies a certain closure (which we would like to address in more details in the first part of this paper), excluding the possibility of plurality itself, which, as we would like to argue, is central to utopia. On the other hand, following utopia – which, in exact opposite to eu-topia, excludes any clear picture of what is good but is constructed around the fact of its non-existent character – may imply an abstinence from any unifying picture which can be seen as a goal, which makes it an easy goal of criticism in the lack of any common ground.

In this paper, we would like to examine the possibility of common within a u-topical project in conditions of lack of *shared*. We will propose to understand this shared as a foundation, and, consequently, we will relate utopia as a foundationless one to post-foundational political tradition, which we will discuss using the notion of ur-topia. This later, which we will represent by Jean-Luc Nancy and Jan Patočka for the purposes of this paper, has no solid essence (such as ideology or belief) which can be shared, contrary to eu-topical (or social utopian, to use Mamardashvili’s vocabulary) one, but this lack of shared allows itself sharing. However, how exactly is this sharing to be understood, as opposed to the shared, on a political and epistemological level?

We propose to examine this difference (between *sharing* and the *shared*, therefore, within this paper, u-topian and eu-topian project) through the dichotomy of form and content, or, to be more precise, by associating eu-topian project to an isolated content, while presupposing that utopia implies

¹ M. Mamardashvili, *Введение в философию*, Фонд Мераба Мамардашвили, Москва 2019 (*Introduction to Philosophy*), p. 284.

an interrelated character between form and content. In other words, we would like to argue that, if the shared is understood as an *isolated content* of what is believed (i.e., certain values), sharing can be seen as manifestation of interrelatedness of form and content, form being seen as a way towards transcendence, whereas content given through the individual embeddedness of one's own life.

We argue that, in eu-topian project, where sharing is conceived through *content*, one may risk getting stuck in reproduction of the same form with different content, a form which brings with it a number of different, unexamined presuppositions, such as, to list only one, that a human social construction can last by its own means without being constantly rethought and renewed, and not just “fueled” by human “material”, or that one can decide for a number of other people what is the real good for them.

An alternative to this rather problematic utopian thinking may be found in the texts of Merab Mamardashvili. This still rather unknown in the West thinker has been influential in the Soviet Union, where he spent the biggest part of his working life. Considered as neither a dissident, nor a philosopher loyal to the party, he has, one could argue, worked on and throughout the tension between the two: on the one hand, a total disapproval of what was happening in the world surrounding him, on the other hand, an incapacity and unwillingness to join any existing, therefore preestablished, movement that would identify itself as a dissident one. He looks for another, third way of dealing with the given, historical, and the aspired for, utopian, which excludes any form of collective pre-determination.

This leads a number of critics to read Mamardashvili as a representative of an individualist current in soviet reality, that which would exclude any possibility of common. The question is, therefore, whether the exclusion of any collectively preestablished meanings would mean the impossibility of common or whether a person-driven form of utopia can aspire for another, new understanding of common.

The goal of this paper is to examine the possibilities that such understanding of utopia may have, as well as its limitations. We will claim that Mamardashvili's understanding of utopia answers the challenge that utopian thinking (both political and philosophical) is facing today – namely, its disenchantment due to the stubborn repressiveness of the dominance of the content in the classical understanding of utopia.

*Between οὐ-τόπος and εὖ-τόπος*²

As has already been mentioned, etymologically, utopia refers to a non-place, u-topos (οὐ-τόπος), whereas eu-topia refers to a good place, eu-topos (εὖ-τόπος). Traditions of approaching utopia can be roughly divided between those that are striving for picturing a good place and those that are elaborating on a non-place. An eu-topos is understood as a place which is “good” for humans, for this or that reason, a happy future to which, once we understand how it looks, we all have to strive. The principal remaining question within such a project is whether it is achievable and, if yes, how to strive for it and how to achieve it in the given reality.

Utopia as a non-place, on the contrary, doesn’t provide one with a content to which one can aspire. A project of a non-place is directed towards not that much picturing and elaborating on a particular content of what one is supposed to strive to (and to want), as on elaborating a non-existent, different from existing, something that doesn’t exist in empirical sense but may have some meaning for human being. Be it because the force of imagination is seen itself as a force of resistance towards the given, or because appealing to a non-place while being situated (and potentially stuck) in this or that *place* allows for living a human life despite the chaos surrounding us, u-topos resists to providing a picture of what is to be achieved – or, as we will argue later, resists to elaborating one shared content of this latter – and is instead referring to its very resisting pulsation that for some reason is important for humans³.

Whether utopia needs to include eutopia is an old question to which a lot of pages have been already devoted. Without entering into the debate of a long history and greater complexity than we could allow ourselves to have here, we can pinpoint a problematic tension in these discussions relevant to our argument.

It has been stated that the idea of a particular “good” is antiliberal as it presupposes a compromise precisely where a discussion and agonism is most

² The idea of applying the tension between eutopia as a good place and utopia as a non-place for deepening understanding of Mamardashvili’s utopia is not mine but has been kindly proposed by Tora Lane during a private conversation.

³ Nancy writes: “Utopia means that it exists nowhere, and that it has no other place than its own representation, which does not refer to a possible referent but, rather, represents an explicit non-reality using elements copied from the real. And yet, it is a place. This non-place is not simply atopic: if it is not another place, it is a place that is other, a place otherwise local and localized, and this outside-place is, in itself, a topos or a figure”. J.-L. Nancy, *In Place of Utopia*, in P. Vieira (ed.), M. Marder (eds.), *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London 2012.

needed (see, for example, Tormey, 2005)⁴. It has equally been argued that reducing utopia to u-topos without any eu-topic content, i.e. without any understanding of what good is, is an equally risky strategy as, depriving an utopian impulse of any image of good place, it risks joining any image available⁵. As Kinna argues, taking eu-topian thinking as automatically antiliberal excludes the possibility of any common image of future and, therefore, according to her, excludes any common as such.

While we take this tension as a productive one and as a one that shouldn't be resolved, but, on the contrary, feed the reflection about utopia, we would like to argue that common doesn't stop where no more positive vision of what is to be aspired for is present. Or, at least, the idea of what is aspired for can be thought as being based not on content (which we will later relate to the given), as is the traditional way of thinking utopia, but on *form* (which, in turn, can be related to the possible). This form-based utopian thinking, we would argue, would propose a u-topos deprived of a priori given content, which is to be filled by every participant by their own, and manifesting a sort of foundationless, if one may prolong the usage of this term beyond its normal political usage, utopian thinking. Foundationless, once again, in the sense of an open declaration of danger of endorsing a particular content. It is foundationless in the sense that it doesn't have any pre-given content – however, one couldn't say that it is content-less, since, as we will see, the content is always to be filled in by a person themselves.

The foundationless character of utopia that we would like to insist upon in this paper, is due not only to the fact that every foundation is random and therefore cannot monopolise the whole space of utopia. Utopia, as a political project, is, by its essence, multi- – multilingual, multicontent, multicontextual etc, i.e. utopia is a manifestation of plurality. As Ruth Kinna claims, following Tormey's argument:

⁴ See Simon Tormey, *From Utopian Worlds to Utopian Spaces: Reflections on the Contemporary Radical Imaginary and the Social Forum Process*, "Ephemera", 2005, No. 5, p. 399.

An example of incorporating such an understanding of risks of eutopia can be found, for example, in Maria Lugones, when she distinguishes between dialogical knowing and utopia: "<...> Her knowing is necessarily dialogical; it doesn't lie in her. It is a cultivation of memory in its poly-logical, poli-vocal complexity that has an anti-utopian direction to the future". María Lugones, "Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker/Estrategias tácticas de la callejera," in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham 2003, pp. 207–237.

⁵ R. Kinna, *Politics, Ideology and Utopia: A Defence of Eutopian Worlds*, "Journal of Political Ideologies," 2011, No. 16(3), pp. 279–294.

Authentically radical utopianism embraces multiplicity. In declaring how we would like to live we must all recognize that our ideals are only individual preferences and that the problem of utopianism is one of ‘the incommensurability of utopias’⁶.

For Tormey, this means that no eu-topian project is defensible, since any idea of a “good place” builds upon its proper exclusivity, preventing any possibility of plurality. As was already mentioned, for Ruth Kinna this is not convincing since the lack of any good place means no common at all.

Ur-topia as a post-foundationalist one

Is there any common left if our ideals are incommensurable? Or, probably, these ideals are to be seen from within different levels, so that a principal incommensurability on one level – let us say on the level of concept, which we will later show the relation to content – would be made possible through a certain common ground achieved on another level? Is there any sort of primordial crux of utopia, which allows the common in the very movement of hosting the multiple?

This multiplicity whose manifestation is a utopia, is, one could argue, primordial in the very sense that Jean-Luc Nancy understands the way meaning is shared, as a pure sharing preceding any possible closure. Or, as Nancy says:

Utopia is always, above all, *social*⁷ in the broadest sense of the word: it places itself in the order of sharing/partitioning of meaning (partage de sens) - that is to say, of meaning itself, absolutely, given that meaning is nothing other than sharing/partitioning. It is ur-topia in a new sense, that of its novel apparition⁸.

The ur-topia Nancy mentions here refers to “a place of origin, of a new and pure origin”⁹ that he introduces a few pages earlier, *ur-*, of which he reminds etymological similarity with “Ursprung” and “Urteil” in German

⁶ R. Kinna, *Politics, Ideology and Utopia: A Defence of Eutopian Worlds*, “Journal of Political Ideologies”, 2011, No. 16(3), pp. 279–294, p.281.

⁷ The usage that Nancy makes of the term “social” is paradoxically closer to what Mamardashvili names “personal” in his understanding of personal utopia (namely, as we argue, as sharing as opposed to shared).

⁸ J.-L. Nancy, “In Place of Utopia”, in P. Vieira (ed.), M. Marder (eds.), *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London 2012, pp. 3–14, p.8.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 5.

language (“it has been compared to the English out, and we could also link it to the privative Greek *ov*”) (Ibid.). The usage of Ur- and “pure” is to be distinguished from understanding purity as one of the origin given by birth, so to speak, empirical origin; such purity would mean eliminating anything that interferes with this origin. In the case of Nancy, and for the purposes of this paper, *Ur-* refers to an *invented, artificial* origin which, as matter of fact, opposes itself to a natural, empirical one. This artificially found origin, therefore, is situated in the mode of sharing, it *is* itself sharing. In this perspective, utopia can’t by its very definition be singular without being plural, it is meant to open a singular towards plurality, or, better to say, to see a singular as an opening towards plurality. Or, should one see the singular as a cut in the body of the existing common which exists as an exposure towards (not as a position within) the common?

The above cited passage of Nancy on utopia gains in clarity when being put next to some of his reflections from “Being Singular Plural”. The *being-with*, central to his argument in this book, is seen by him as a core of common being, both irreplaceable and inevitable as primordial (which makes an echo to the *Ur-* prefix). In the part of the book named “Gaining access to the origin”, he writes:

Our being-with, as a being-many, is not at all accidental, and it is in no way the secondary and random dispersion of a primordial essence. It forms the proper and necessary status and consistency of originary alterity as such. *The plurality of beings is at the foundation* [fondment] *of Being*¹⁰.

In other words, being-with, plurality of beings is not a constitution of a higher order which appears only after being somehow cultivated. Being-with is there from the start, before any common project could be put in place, the plurality of being is its proper foundation, being is only as far as it is plural. Does that mean that any kind of *political project* would satisfy the demand of opening towards plurality? Nancy seems to have been opposed to such understanding, as creating a project that would actually respect this plurality seems itself to be a challenge. When one starts trying to create a “communion” instead of common, that is to say, when plural becomes a *single*, one loses this being-with: “The community that becomes a *single* thing

¹⁰ Id., *Being Singular Plural*, engl. transl., Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000, p.12.

(body, mind, fatherland, Leader ...) necessarily loses the *in* of being-in-common”¹¹.

The common *is* as long as it is being-with, both “being” and “with”, singular plural. This is why any attempts to get rid of either one part, – if one can at all see a part in something indivisible – singular, or another, plural, means condemning this enterprise to an auto-identity, self repetivity, auto-immunity (Derrida), immanence. It is in this auto-immunal identity that “individual” and “communism”, paradoxically (as being seemingly opposites) meet, according to Nancy:

The theme of the individual and that of communism are closely bound up with (and bound together in) the general problematic of immanence. They are bound together in their denial of ecstasy¹².

Neither individual, nor communism allow for going beyond what is given, for transcending the auto-identity of immanence. We will later see that this resistance to both “individual” and “communist” themes takes its form through, on the one hand, the critique of social utopia, and, on the other, opposition to individualism in Mamardashvili’s texts. We would like to argue that, contrary to what has been addressed to him in the form of critics (Bibikhin, Mezhuiev etc), Mamardashvili distances himself both to social and individual utopia, searching for a third, unexplored way, a personal utopia (*lichnaya utopia*)¹³, which is, as we will claim, to be understood as a post-foundationalist utopia.

This post-foundational character of u-topia of Mamardashvili is enabled, as we argue, by the sharing as driving principle of personal utopia, as opposed to shared. As has already been hinted the way Mamardashvili treats the concept “social” is not the same as Nancy does. When Nancy states that any meaning is social, he insists on sharing whereas when Mamardashvili confronts himself to “social utopia”, he resists precisely to the shared of it, to what Nancy called, in a quote cited above, “a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader ...)”. This controversy in terms can be seen as

¹¹ Id., *The Inoperative Community*, engl. transl., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991, p. XXIX.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 6.

¹³ It has to be noted that the word личность in Russian has a slightly different connotation than the word personal which makes it more difficult to mistake it for some kind of personalistic approach. Personality, contrary to individual, is not born naturally, it becomes such by interiorizing a set of norms and values.

symptomatic, as both Nancy and Mamardashvili are searching for singular plural, reducible neither to “individual” nor to “communist”.

As we have seen, a presupposition according to which there is no reason to believe that one understanding of what is good is better than another one, obliges us to restrain from founding utopia on any particular idea of what is good. The idea of what is good is to be bracketed in the sake of searching for some kind of preconceptual, if under concept we understand a general representation following understanding about the world, that is precontentual, as deprived of concrete embeddedness which allows the concrete material of fulfillment of content, common. An attempt to found politics on a lack of foundation is in no case novel and has already got a name of post-foundationalist political thought.

As has already been said, this primordial character of being-with is in play already before any common project has been formulated, and it is not a simple task for a common (political) project to maintain this sharing, instead of reducing its opening to one or another pole of auto-identitital repetition (such of singularity or of communism). However, does this primordial character of sharing of meaning also imply its pre-historicity, in other words, does it mean that it is a naive, natural state of being which is further “spoiled” when becoming part of human history, or culture?

It seems as if for Nancy this primordial sharing is there from the very beginning, one doesn’t need to become a part of any community in order to experience being-with. On the contrary, community, which is a certain historical embedment, risks to fold either “being” or “with”, and it is on the second step, on the step of political (or any common) project that this being-with is to be found again. Being-with exists therefore *before history* (understood as unfolding of diverse human projects) but is also to be voluntarily found and maintained *within history*.

This is not exactly the case for someone like Jan Patočka, for whom prehistoricity happens in some sort of suffocating meaningfulness due to the embedment in a myth. Its “*shaking*” (and therefore *sharing*, given that the latter is possible when no unshaken shared is left) is possible only on the level of historicity, which is when myth, an organizing force of pre-historical society, doesn’t function anymore. This is when the domination of meaningfulness is shaken, and the ruins of this latter become a new mode of meaning:

The constant shaking of the naive sense of meaningfulness is itself a new mode of meaning, a discovery of its continuity with the mysteriousness of being and what-is as a whole¹⁴.

This shaking of the naive sense of meaningfulness is possible only from the position of “historic humanity”, which means that it is not pre-given: “History differs from prehistoric humanity by the shaking of accepted meaning”¹⁵.

Solidarity of the shaken for Patočka refers to the mode of common being which is pre-reflexive, pre-conceptual, no-meaningful, but this very shaking of meaning has as its condition the state of shakeness, which suggests that the work of doubt is already underway. In other words, if we continue the line of thought started with Nancy, solidarity of the shaken is primordial but in no way pre-historical, it is a sort of primordiality sought after having been shaken, that is to say, after letting a disrupt the consolidated meaning. Or, probably, one could say that what Patočka calls naive meaningfulness would be for Nancy a naive type of community based on myth, which doesn't allow sharing but merely a filling in of existential gaps which would provide a shared meaning without it really being shared. In other words, utopia, if there was any for Patočka, would have been not an ur-topia but as a u-topia, contrary to Nancy (as it is also the case for Mamardashvili, as we will show later). The ur-topia becomes utopia by the act of acknowledgment of no-placeness of the Ur that Nancy is elaborating. In other words, the Ur-, for Mamardashvili, becomes the u- itself which is to be held and maintained despite the density of real - real physical place and time, as will be argued later.

As Elisa Pontini mentions, while the movement of Hegelian thought (which is to be associated with eu-topian project for Mamardashvili¹⁶) is:

¹⁴ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, engl. transl., Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois 1996, p. 61.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p.62.

¹⁶ “<...> Hegel fell into the ideological temptation of realizing his utopian ideas not upon himself, but upon others; that is: this is how the state should be organized, this is how society can be organized, and this is how it must be organized. It must follow, after Hegel, the truth he has discovered—and if it does not, it can even be dragged there by force, because a person does not know what is good for him.” (Mamardashvili, 2019b, p. 292, our translation)

“conceived in its directionality, as a back-and-forth movement that, just like a hand movement of a weaver, weaves the texture of reality”¹⁷,

Mamardashvili's understanding of movement:

*had more to do with the setting of the loom, even prior to any weaving*¹⁸.

This precise metaphor of a weaver and the loom that Elisa Pontini proposes can be continued in understanding of how human social tissue is made. While for Hegel there is a certain directionality to be followed, and the movement of thought is joining this directionality in order to develop the social tissue, sublating pieces of cloth or thread, Mamardashvili is more interested in what precedes any possible weaving, which is, in a certain sense, a primordial act to which one has to come back again and again, without being able to establish it once and forever¹⁹. But what exactly can be shared in the situation of lack of anything that can be established in a more or less solid way?

¹⁷ See E. Pontini, *Topology of Difference. Trace, Repetition and Responsibility in the Philosophy of Merab Mamardashvili*, Dissertation to obtain doctor's degree, Radboud University Nijmegen (2024).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Using the occasion, we would like to elaborate on the following. The title of this call for papers, “Re-tracing utopia”, seems particularly appropriate for this reason. Utopia cannot be drawn or conceptualized in a “once and forever” way. Traces are not the same as drawings or words; traces can be left by a child who has no words, who cannot speak, an autistic child (as described by Deligny in *L'arachnéen et autres textes*, Arachnéen, 2008, p. 256), by an animal, whom a human deprived of ability to answer (as Derrida develops in “The animal that I am).

Traces resist conceptualization. Or, as Clément Lion argues in his text “Lieu d'être et non présence” (2024), “Ce *tracer* ne s'appuie sur aucune connivence acquise *a priori*, ni même sur l'espoir d'une coïncidence. Il rencontrera cependant peut-être un autre *tracer*, par hasard. L'espace pur <...> est un espace où chaque mode d'être trace sa propre ligne selon ce qu'il est proprement, en traversant les lieux qui sont ajustés à son être, dans une divergence irréductible que toute écriture systématique vient nécessairement rompre, en tant que négation nécessaire de l'extériorité constitutive de l'espace pur, où s'inscrit, de façon primordiale, toute trajectoire de sens, y compris et avant tout celle qui ne peut pas être réfléchie comme telle par cet être, là, qui l'émet”. Clément Lion, *Lieu d'être et non présence*, in “Tijdschrift voor Filosofie, Fernand Deligny”, Vol. 86, No. 4, 2024, pp. 661-686.

(Non)-foundation as a form

We would like to argue that one productive way to approach this notion of sharing without the solid shared is to view it through the lens of the dialectic of form and content. If “meaning” is understood as a kind of filling of emptiness prior to any disruption, then it can be conceived as content. In a classical understanding of the eu-topian project, there is typically a goal, and this goal constitutes content, even when defined negatively (as something unachievable). By contrast, a u-topian, foundationless enterprise would not include any tangible goal or pre-established content. Instead, it would enable sharing as such, sharing as sharing, which, as we propose, operates at the level of *form*. This formal dimension is especially evident in the case of Mamardashvili’s notion of personal utopia.

What is a form for Mamardashvili in the first place? It refers merely to:

something different from the natural. For example, Kant notes that we cannot be saints in a natural way. Remember, I told you about the second birth. Now refer it all to the term “form”, by the representation of formal, of an inwardly given connection in the sense of co-joining²⁰.

In other words, a form is to be understood here by its opposition to the natural, as an artificial creation that allows a human to become human (while being born for the second time – actively born as a human being, as a personality, in contrast to a first, natural, inertially made birth). It is by being born for the second time that one approaches the common, namely, one could propose, the common of secondly born, of a form that allows it. Mamardashvili continues (in a most characteristic for him way):

A hoop that holds together a barrel which is bursting apart from within itself; the barrel is us. (Here the Georgian archetype within me started speaking, and I involuntarily shifted to the language of the wine barrels familiar to me.) Thus, to overcome our propensity to evil, neither the human being’s own strength as a natural creature—meaning his psychological impulses, drives, intentions—nor the improvement of the social order is sufficient²¹.

Humans need forms in order to become humans and maintain humanness in themselves. One can’t resist “propensity to evil” from within the naturality of their existence, to do so, one needs to go through a second

²⁰ М. Mamardashvili, *Очерк современной европейской философии*, Фонд Мераба Мамардашвили, Москва 2017 (*Outline of Contemporary European Philosophy*), p. 88.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

birth. The improvement of social order can't help either, for the reasons discussed above related to utopian project and the problematicity of social utopian thinking.

Does the hoop metaphor refer to a control over emotions, a stoic-like control that has become the aim of Nietzsche's attack in "Beyond Good and Evil"? Indeed, one could say that Mamardashvili's thought comes close to control, and can even be seen as a provocative one in the context of Soviet history, as the metaphor of a hoop holding the barrel could have very well be used for illustrating the necessity to control the people²² – and this can join an impression one could get while reading passages on cartesian politeness, for example²³. However, what Mamardashvili emphasizes, is not form as control and not control for the sake of control, but form as a crucible of human being, which prevents a barrel from "bursting apart from within itself" not by a mere control over what could burst apart, but by *reinvention of the content* of what is bursting itself, reinvention impossible without interaction between form and content. One can even argue that the totality of the self that bursts around itself without being contained by any form is the totalization itself which necessarily requires limiting others in order for this totalization to take place. Such a common which allows for coexistence presupposes that its actors go through the hoops of humanization as opposed to such of totalization.

²² See, for example, Dobrenko, referring to soviet power, "the masses ... are squeezed by the hoop of power ... strive to wrap their bare flesh ...". E. Dobrenko, *Метафоры власти. Литература сталинской эпохи в историческом освещении*, München. Verlag Otto Sagner, Slavistische Beiträge, Band 302, p. 408.

Mamardashvili's usage of the term "form" is not classical – compare, for example, with the meaning of this concept that Alexei Yurchak develops in his work "Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything was forever Until it was no more". According to Yurchak's understanding, *formality* and *proforma* became the concepts that allowed the ideological machine to function smoothly, and the pragmatic turn that took place in the late Soviet Union allowing for the dominance of form over meaning was a condition for the dominance of a rigid form. As Yurchak writes, "it was increasingly important to reproduce precise ideological forms than to adhere to the precise meanings these forms were supposed to convey". A. Yurchak, *Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, "Comparative Studies in Society and History", 2003, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 480–510.

²³ "And Descartes says, as a well-bred person, <...>, that for a polite person there still remains at least the possibility and the strength to control their gestures. Convulsions may shake us, but a polite person controls their gestures, and all the more so their words <...>. Of course, such states cannot be avoided; we are shaken, our body is shaken, and with it the soul—but at least control your gestures if you are polite and well brought up, and even more so—your words" (Mamardashvili, 2019b, p. 48, my translation – S.S.)

As Elisa Pontini notes, form and content are related in Mamardashvili's understanding of dialectical movement in a very close way:

Mamardashvili understands the difference between form and content as a matter of perspective, since content and form, as we shall soon see, are the expression of one and the same activity. In fact, he defines activity as “content” when considered in its objective expression, independently from human input, and he defines the same activity as “form” when taken from the perspective of the subjective human process of thought²⁴.

In other words, the form for Mamardashvili allows the individual to *touch* on an objective expression, independent from human input, but the very “path” towards it is allowed via form, whose existence it to be reanimated by human input. Content exists autonomously from human beings, at the same time being driven by them, - which is rather counterintuitive - and can be seen as a starting point of dialectical movement.

The form, in its turn, is one's *way* towards this absolute. Not only the way cannot exist without its goal, even a very abstract and vague one, but also the condition of possibility of the goal's (content's) existence lies in perpetual renovation of the human *way* towards it. A form for Mamardashvili is, therefore, a hoop which allows not holding together by force a certain content which is naturally destined for being bursted, but reinvention of the barrel, as well as of the points between the hoop and the barrel.

It would therefore be hard to give a concrete example of what a form may be, given the fact that it is a rather abstract concept whose manifestation on its own doesn't yet tell anything concrete about its origin. Thus, almost any activity that aims at transcending one's own being – be it painting, writing, researching – can be part of either a gesture belonging to and maintaining “social utopia” or as a gesture aspiring to touch on form which would enable personal utopia. What distinguishes personal utopia from a social one, however, is that it aims at touching upon the absolute without either appropriating it or being subsumed by it. As the author of the only paper on utopia in Mamardashvili which we know, Polyakov²⁵, notes that utopical

²⁴ E. Pontini, *The Roots of Mamardashvili's Topological Approach. Normativity and the Problem of Form in Hegel in Rethinking Mamardashvili*, Philosophical Perspectives, Analytical Insights, Brill, 2022, p. 188.

²⁵ A. V. Polyakov, *Мамардашвили об утопическом мышлении: от логики мифа к логике символической* (Mamardashvili about Utopian Thinking: From the Logic of Myth to the Logic of Symbol), “Гуманитарный вестник”, 2021, No. 3.

thinking in Mamardashvili can be distinguished between such of a myth, which searches for solid basis (and which belongs to social utopia, we can add), which is utopia of *existing*, and such of a symbol, which is utopia of *possible*.

The natural part of human beings refers to the barrel itself (which is not the same as the content, to which we will come back later), and this natural part has no resources inside itself that would allow it not to follow the flow of evil dominated by the forces of inertia. In fact, the barrel, being natural, *is* driven by the forces of inertia, that is to say, by the forces of blindly made random relations that are conditioned by what already exists - either in an inner, instinct-driven, or external, social world. Neither our personal natural strength, nor (eutopical) improvement of social order may help resisting evil, and only introducing the form – the hoop in Mamardashvili’s metaphor – can help doing it. Mamardashvili continues:

Kant’s thought moves along the edge of a knife between two things that it rejects equally. On the one hand, there is what we are aware of in ourselves and cannot help but love, flattering ourselves. Our beautiful states of soul, intentions, good impulses, and their psychological sign—the “good,” when I feel, am conscious, that I am “good.” But all of this is empty, Kant would say. If there is no form. Only on form can one rely, not on intentions, not on impulses (for example, the impulse to be brave, to be kind—this is something one is conscious of as one’s own state, but which, according to Kant, is not sufficient)²⁶.

One could continue: the impulse to be brave (which we could roughly compare with the eu- impulse) is not enough in order to belong to humanity since it can be practiced for opposite purposes – both for killing and for avoiding killing, both for speaking out and being silent (in line with what has been said above about ahistorical fascist understanding of culture). What counts for Mamardashvili as a gesture of belonging to humanity that an individual can make is the respect towards the *form*. Neither subjective feelings, nor social structure of society can allow one to respect the form. As to subjective feelings (even if collectively shared) about a good act in each single person, they may refer to completely different forms of act. Thus, shaving women who had intimate relations with Nazi soldiers in post-war France has been seen as a just form of revenge, but it may also be seen as a reproduction of the basis of human relations that Nazism built itself on:

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

It has been truly said that the system of terror which Mussolini introduced into Western Europe enjoyed a sinister triumph in the orgy of vengeance over the dead bodies of the fascist dictator and his mistress. It triumphed when French girls were paraded with shaved heads before a vituperative populace in punishment for intimate relations with German soldiers²⁷.

Following the instincts of revenge could nourish the *animal-like* feeling of being moral - that is, an inertial, barrel-like type of belonging, but it does not allow to "hold the barrel together". In fact, these very instincts that lead to humiliation of the enemy don't allow one to resist or struggle against this latter as one speaks up from the same place as the enemy - namely, on the place where the barrel stays.

This is not to be confused, though, with what could have been provided by a certain organization of society regulating human behaviour by a set of legislations in such a way that citizens perform what is considered to be appropriate according to the current governor (which refers to what Mamardashvili calls *social utopia*). This second extreme is problematic for several reasons, but one of them which interests Mamardashvili the most is that it is based on the assumption that social life may be built on a certain idea of what is good may rely on how others perform it²⁸. We can also add that social utopia relies on a number of people who are in power, and therefore the content of what is considered to be appropriate is contingent and depends on the possibility of these people in power to lead a non-barrel existence that would not leave the others without any epistemic and existential agency.

A hoop as a form is not "controlling" a barrel overloaded with emotions in a somewhat totalitarian manner, but first and foremost allows it to transform this barrel. The barrel (content) stands for a particular existence of a single human, and it can't transcend itself neither by a will to do so, nor by joining a concrete social force. It has to be con-jugated with form, or to go through the crucible of form, in order to join the common, to be neither

²⁷ L. Löwenthal, *Terror's Atomization of Man*, "Commentary: Law, Government and Society," 1946, No. (January), p. 6.

²⁸ "I could count on working with others, on accomplishing something through others—say, a utopia—if I believed that what I built upon them could exist on its own. I have built something beautiful, and this beauty will endure. I repeat: the very assumption that one must transform other people contains an entirely rigid and inexorable premise—that I can claim to be building something, building it upon others, if I assume that it is possible to build something once and for all". M. Mamardashvili, *Картезианские размышления*, Фонд Мераба Мамардашвили, Москва 2019b, p. 285.

isolated, and stuck in auto-immunal repetivity of one's own identity, nor dissolved in a project which excludes any individual differences. The form, therefore, is not to be understood as an empty package, or a shell with no mussel inside. On the contrary, form and content are connected in such a way that form is not imaginable without content. This means that in order for this form to be, it has to be maintained by an effort made by human beings, an effort which is not embedded in any particular historical time and still, as we would like to argue, is historical.

Historicity of utopia: no-place, no-time

Personal utopia of Mamardashvili has a very particular relation to time: it is both in time and out of time, or, better to say, it is in some kind of parallel time. If social eu-topia pretends to be part of historical time, its alternative, one could say, is not only a no-place, but also a no-time; utopian time, if there is any, is of another kind than the historical one. In the following passage Mamardashvili elaborates on philosophy as being essentially utopian (considering what has already been mentioned about the status of philosophy for utopia, one can clearly read the following as referring to a particular case of utopia as such²⁹):

For philosophy, there is no historical time – not in the sense that it truly does not exist, but that it does not exist as an object or subject matter from which philosophy could be constructed. <...> Strictly speaking, at the foundation of great philosophies and religious reflections lies a very simple idea: that there is some other kind of life besides our everyday, ordinary one – and that this other life is more meaningful, more whole. And what is everyday, ordinary life? It is precisely history: that which happens; where we live and what we are sick of. If, by definition, philosophy is what comes after you feel sick, then naturally philosophy cannot consist in digging into what makes you sick and accepting it. Consequently, I return you – and philosophy – to a *u-topos* constructed above the historical process and across it; that is, to a non-existent world, though now in a somewhat different sense³⁰.

Philosophy can not have historical time as its base, as its mission consists precisely in overcoming this historicity (which refers to “everyday”,

²⁹ “Philosophy, without any doubt, contains within itself an element of utopia”. M. Mamardashvili, *Введение в философию*, Фонд Мераба Мамардашвили, Москва 2019 (Introduction to Philosophy), p. 282.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 285.

“ordinary” as opposed to “meaningful” and “more wholesom”). Philosophy, as a highmost utopical construction, exists on the basis of a utopia, “constructed above the historical process and across it”, to a non-place as an expression of a research of meaning by human being.

Philosophy, and utopia, therefore don’t exist in time, or, “better to say, in some other kind of time, or in what we very conditionally call time just because we have no other words for it”³¹.

Utopia is out of time, but, as we would like to argue later, it doesn’t mean that it is ahistorical.

Indeed, personal utopia for Mamardashvili is not only a non-place but also a non-time, which means that it is out of historical time. This doesn’t mean, however, that personal utopia is deprived of historicity - the contrary is the case, as will be argued below.

Indeed, the only possible utopian thought for Mamardashvili is referring to a non-place (and non-time) in a sense that this u-topos presents a form, an ahistorical, or, probably, metahistorical, human form which allows a human to become human by directing their effort in this form, as if this latter was a lever allowing for a singular empirical effort to amplify it to a truly human one:

Such crystallizers, or coagulators, are simple things – any invention, for example, a lever. It transforms our abilities and contains within itself a certain number of potential human actions which, once embedded in the form of the lever, accomplish what cannot be done by direct physical effort. This lever exists as a transformer of our physical forces, and everything we might do is already embedded in it, already present. Whether it will be done or not – whether the lever will actually be brought into one position today or tomorrow, or whether it will be brought into the next position, following from the first, in a thousand years – the lever itself does not depend on this: within it, all positions are played out outside of time, in a u-topos³².

A timeless lever (a form) for the human soul are, for Mamardashvili, art, philosophy, notions of love, dignity, honesty, etc. They are forms, that is, they contain “within themselves a certain number of potential human

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 282.

³² *Ivi*, p. 289.

actions”. This is not to be understood as a determination of a limit of human action but, on the contrary, as a space where an infinite number of ways to appropriate it can be born. The second birth, that is the birth of personality, is made through their appropriation, one could say, if under appropriation one understands fulfilling the content - that is, one’s effort made through and from their particular position in space and history – towards fulfillment/appropriation of the form.

Does this timelessness imply lack of historicity? We would like to argue that, somewhat paradoxically, while “social utopian” attempts to gain historicity are condemned to fail, personal utopia, being out of time, allows this historicity. Being a subject of social utopia means being part of a project whose idea is not ours, in other words, it implies that a subject plays a role of a material, play-doh fulfilling functions pre-conceived by an author of social utopia. From the point of view of the subject, this means joining forces that are bigger and more powerful than them, handing over one’s own agency to a social one. It can easily resemble at what Paul-Louis Landsberg described analysing the phenomenon of personal engagement:

The will to escape the horror of an individual life devoid of any valid foundation by identifying with any power whatsoever provided that it’s strong, this betrayal may produce excellent partisans, but it is nothing else than a form of active falsehood, not an access to a true historicity of human being³³.

This *escapist* form of engagement and agency related to it are, paradoxically (since that’s what they are aiming at, allegedly), out of history, by willing to join any force, they “don’t have an access to a true historicity of human”. In this sense, the content of an ideology is becoming unimportant “provided that it’s strong”, as well as emotions and sense of community that it provokes. Such understanding of the *common* allows any content to take place and paradoxically it doesn’t have any grip on *what* is believed since the act of joining the power becomes more important than the content of belief itself. The content is detached from its origin. This very detachment allows for an ideological eclecticism, where one belief may be easily substituted with another one, tsarist ideology with a communist one, communist with

³³ P.-L., Landsberg, *Réflexions sur l’engagement personnel*, Éditions Allia, Paris 2021, pp. 16-17 (my translation).

neoliberal and so on³⁴. The fascist form of culture plays on mass will and mass energy through thoroughly organized symbols that allow for any content to fit it, which makes it ahistorical. This brings us back to what has been stated in regard to Nancy above, namely that basing common on a forcefully retrieved shared is self-deceiving.

As a non-place and non-time, personal utopia is historical because, contrary to social utopia, it demands from its subject to fulfill the gap between ideal and historical themselves. In an uneasy movement between one's own position in history, the historical context, between form and content, an actor of personal utopia is to find the way to historicity in every moment by their own effort³⁵. This way is by no means guaranteed, but at least allowed, given that no historical structure exists in a ready form.

Conclusion

Utopia, whichever form it takes, is centered around the idea of common. It resists, either positively, that is by providing an alternative picture, or negatively, by providing an unreal picture or resisting to picturing anything, to what is given. As we have seen, this very idea of common tends to be replaced by something that we call *communal* within this paper, that is such which endorses solid and solidified shared which prevents any real plurality, or by *individual*, which means that in any of these cases it is condemned to be close in its identity instead of the process of sharing. We have examined the arguments according to which eu-topia, as one whose goal is to provide a picture of a good place, necessarily faces the challenge of reducing the possible plurality of "good places" to one of them. On the other pole of it, the possible challenge of u-topia as a non-place consists in not having any common picture whatsoever. Agreeing with the risks following from the lack of common picture and therefore of common goal, imminent to u-topian movement, we nevertheless argue that u-topia can be seen as a manifestation of common. Whether this non-place is still to be thought as an exclusively ethical-existential construction or can be seen as containing any political force is an open question, the tension between the two being essential for questioning itself.

We argue that a non-place which allows for common, is such that oscillates between its ur-topian and u-topian state. Ur-topia, as the one which

³⁴ As it has been happening in URSS and Russia for the last century, as some of the analysis suggest – see, for example, M. Laruelle, *Russia's Ideological Construction in the Context of the War in Ukraine*, "Russie. Eurasie. Reports", No. 46, Ifri, March 2024.

³⁵ One may suggest that by insisting on this historicity, Mamardashvili's thought goes further than post-foundationalism.

precedes any articulated project, corresponds to Nancy's understanding of meaning as *sharing* itself, without any meaningfulness to be articulated yet. The challenge of a political project is to articulate something common which wouldn't disable this sharing and *replace* it by shared. It is for this reason that ur-topia doesn't seem to be enough as a political project and demands a utopian agenda, which, as we have tried to show, can be articulated by introducing the dialectical movement between form and content. If an eutopian project (or social utopian, in Mamardashvili's terminology) aims at detaching form and content from each other, we argued that an u-topian, at least in the understanding of personal utopia that Mamardashvili is depicting, allows for a close interrelatedness of both in such a way that form can be seen as allowing a foundationless common. It is precisely form in its relation to content that allows to escape the process of eutopical replacement of different visions of what is good, with no resistance to each other and with no place for common.

