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EDUARD ATAYAN: A QUEST FOR SOUL AND FREEDOM

Der moderne armenische Philosoph Eduard Atayan (1932–2002) begann seinen philosophischen Weg ausgehend von der Philosophie der Sprache und der Semiotik. Anschließend führte er seine Versuche fort, den Ort des Subjekts und des individuellen Bewusstseins in der Unendlichkeit des Universums zu verstehen. Er synthetisierte einige Ergebnisse aus den Denktraditionen aus West und Ost und kam derart zum Begriff des Kreuzes. Dieser besteht aus einer vertikalen Achse des Geistes (Brahman), der Seele bzw. der Natur des Ichs (Atman) und der Materie (Maya), sowie aus der horizontalen Achse, die das Wesen des Ichs (Essenz des Ichs) (Brahman), der Seele bzw. der Natur des Ichs (Atman) und des Phänomens des Ichs (Maya) positioniert. Im Zentrum dieses Kreuzes befinden sich die Seele oder die Natur des Ichs (Atman), sowie der Mensch in seiner einzigartigen Situation als endliches/unendliches Dasein, sowie zugleich als bestimmt und frei. Atayan behauptet, dass die Möglichkeit zur Freiheit der menschlichen Wesen auf der Kreativität basiert, sowie auf der Liebe und Selbstopferung. Doch anstelle diese Eigenschaften zu pflegen, leiden die menschlichen Wesen an ein Gebrechen, von Atayan „elevterit“ oder Entflammung der Freiheit, genannt. Im Falle der Nationen oder deren historischen Orte, denkt Atayan an eine andere Art von Kreuz. Auf seiner vertikalen Achse sind fünf Begriffe angezeigt: Spiritualität, Öffentlichkeit, Psyche, Vitalität, und schlussendlich Physis (als Natur). Horizontal ist die armenische Nation zwischen dem Geist der Nation (dem Westen) und dem universalen Geist, vom nationalen Punkt aus gesehen (dem Osten), platziert. Diese Situation Armeniens, im Zwischen bzw. auf dem Kreuzweg der Zivilisationen zu stehen, eröffnet den Armeniern vielerlei Möglichkeiten.

Contemporary Armenian philosopher, outstanding linguist, educator, polyglot and translator Eduard Atayan (1932-2002) developed a theory of the human soul and its manifestations that attracted the thinking people in Armenia and abroad, offering a deeply humanistic and at the same time widely cosmic understanding of reality and the place of humans within it. In the multifaceted heritage of Atayan different specialists (such as semiologists, linguists, philosophers, historians, psychologists, art theoretics, etc.) can find solutions matching their different interests and tastes. Nevertheless, Atayan earned education of a linguist and worked in the department of linguistics in Yerevan state university, and his first monographs were devoted to the problems of the language¹. Yet considering language as an expression of the whole reality, and the reality as an actuality

¹ Eduard Atayan, *Predmet i osnovnie ponjatija strukturalnogo syntaksisa*, Mitk, Yerevan, 1968 [Eduard Atayan, *The Subject and the Main Concepts of Structural Syntax*, Mitk Publishing House, Yerevan 1968 (in Russian)]; Eduard Atayan, *Aspektij organizazii i funkcionirovanija jazikovoj sferij*, Izd. Yerevanskogo Universiteta, Yerevan 1976 [Eduard Atayan, *Aspects of the Organization and Function of the Linguistic Sphere*, YSU press, Yerevan 1976 (in Russian)]; Eduard Atayan, *The Internal Organization and the External Reference of the Language World*, YSU press, Yerevan 1981 (in Armenian).

that cannot exist without linguistic sheath, Atayan turned to the ontological problem of the language and began his voyage in philosophy². He firstly comprehended the whole reality as a sign itself and stated that everything is a sign or at least can be considered as a sign. So, signedness is universal and describes relations between the object and the subject. In Atayan's theory the concepts of sign and non-sign have philosophical wideness and are used for explaining everything: the universe, society and the human.

Initially starting with philosophy of language, Atayan came to his philosophy of freedom and creativity through continuing his search and his attempt to understand the place of the subject, or individual consciousness, within the infinity of the universe³. One could explain this movement from linguistics to philosophy of language and finally to philosophy of freedom as a result of the inner development of Atayan as a thinker. And this would be correct. But it is also noteworthy that Atayan was mainly focused on philosophy of language before 1991 and that he started publishing on freedom after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Armenia's declaration of independence in 1991. Perhaps he did not like the atmosphere where Soviet materialistic and totalitarian thinking prevailed, and he, being a philosopher by nature, preferred slightly other ("more neutral") spheres for his quests⁴. Let us not forget that his grandfather, the poet, writer, and translator Arshak Atayan, was wrongly imprisoned and executed in 1938 in the era of vast repression, being posthumously acquitted in 1955⁵. Perhaps this tragedy experienced across generations living in the Soviet Union played a role for this thinker to delve into the deepest spheres of philosophical-linguistic analyses, domains where the dilettante Soviet censors would be unable to understand anything. Who knows, maybe that is why his texts are not easy to read; they re-

² Eduard Atayan, *Jazik i vnezazikovaja dejstvitenost: Opit ontologicheskogo sravnenija*, Izd. Yerevanskogo Univ., Yerevan 1987 [Eduard Atayan, *Language and extralinguistic Reality: An Attempt of Ontological Comparison*, YSU press, Yerevan 1987 (in Russian)].

³ Eduard Atayan, *Svoboda kak ideja i kak dejstvitenost*, Izd. Yerevanskogo Univ., Yerevan 1992 [Eduard Atayan, *Freedom as an Idea and as Reality*, YSU press, Yerevan 1992, in Russian]; Eduard Atayan, *Bolezn zdorovih: Harakterologija i tipologija nesvobodi*, Tip. Izd. S. Hachenz, Yerevan 1997 [Eduard Atayan, *Illness of the Healthy: Characterology and Typology of Non- freedom*, S. Khachents publishing house, Yerevan 1997 (in Russian)].

⁴ Armenian philosopher Levon Abrahamyan wrote in 2004: "E. R. Atayan was a great philosopher, but, of course, an outstanding linguist. It may be asked: why he didn't become a professional philosopher in such case? Probably, because, when he was deciding on this question, a certain type of philosophers was needed, that he could not and did not want to be". (*The Voice of Armenia*, 16 March 2004). Here Abrahamyan implies the materialist philosophers, such as so-called Marxist-Leninists, who were the only type of philosophers allowed in the Soviet Union.

⁵ <https://hy.wikipedia.org>, Article "Arshak Atayan" (in Armenian).

quire a reader willing to work hard in order to catch the breadth and depth of his investigations and one who is able to deal with his erudition, especially as it works to connect different epochs and regions of thinking in a single mental act. It is notable that in the 1990s the nature of Atayan's publications changed: they were focused on problems of individual freedom and national independence, national character and identity, and the future of the newly established young Armenian state. Atayan's academic remarks took on more of a public quality, and he began sharing his notions of self-purification, of the soul's inner work, of types of non-freedom, etc. with a wide thinking community. This led him to attempt to formulate his thoughts in a more comprehensive manner, but now Atayan's laconic expressions were creating new challenges for readers, as each of his statements had a whole story with its own logical development behind it. This was a decade marked by creative work and fruitful social activities: along with teaching at Yerevan State University he gave public lectures in museums and various institutions and published articles in both narrow professional periodicals as well as in widely circulated journals and newspapers. He tried to reach thinking people in his homeland with a vision of the bright future of Armenian spirituality. Atayan passed away in 2002, leaving behind many articles in a wide array publications as well as some portions of future monographs, some of which were collected by his followers and published posthumously in various collections, translations, and a monograph⁶. In October 2007, the international conference "Homage to Eduard Atayan" took place at Yerevan State University, and a collection of articles devoted to different facets of Atayan's heritage was published, including a bibliography of Atayan's publications⁷.

As we already have seen, Atayan's philosophy begins from his philosophy of language, or semiotic theory. In his article "Sign and Signedness: Three Mental Experiments of Molding the World" Atayan himself gives an overview of his previous research and his first two monographs along the following lines⁸. According to him: 1) The sign is a universal, and thus philosophical category,

⁶ Eduard Atayan, *Soul and Freedom. Articles and Translations*. S. Khachents Publishing House, Yerevan 2005, (in Armenian); Eduard Atayan, *The Meaning of Independence. Articles and Translations*. S. Khachents and Printinfo, Yerevan 2010 (in Armenian); Eduard Atayan, *Dusha i ee manifestazij: Vozmojnosti, verojatnosti*, Evidentis, Moskva 2012 [Eduard Atayan, *The Soul and Its Manifestations: Possibilities, Probabilities, Compulsorities and Desirabilities*, Evidentis, Moscow 2012 (in Russian)].

⁷ Ashot Abrahamyan et al. (eds.), *Sign. System. Communication: A Collection of Articles Devoted to the Memory of Eduard Atayan*, YSU press, Yerevan 2011 [articles in different languages: Armenian, English, Russian, French, etc.].

⁸ Eduard Atayan, *Sign and Signedness: Three Mental Experiments of Molding the World*, in: Eduard Atayan, *Soul and Freedom. Articles and Translations*, S. Khachents publishing house, Yerevan 2005, pp. 298-322 (in Armenian).

for the phenomenon of signedness covers the whole world on the epistemological-cognitive side and complements with the equally universal category of “non-sign,” which is the same world seen from an ontological-phenomenological perspective. 2) The language and the sign are complementary concepts; yet ontological movement dominates in language, and in the sign epistemological movement dominates. The linguistic aspect highlights the tendency of the individual to free expression (though implicitly there is a moment of designation), while the semiotic aspect highlights the feature that the individual can analyze and represent the mass of the meanings and significances (although subordinately there is a moment of expression). 3) Due to their many meanings, the concepts “metaphor,” “metonymy,” and “synecdoche” should be removed from the scope of linguistics and should instead serve as universal cognitive categories. In essence, the human mind has three possibilities for advancement: the movement from the general to the particular or vice versa (synecdoche); movement within the limits of the particular or the general (metonymy); and flying movement (metaphor). 4) The function of expression (presentation) dominates in natural sign-symptoms, while the function of reflection (representation) dominates in conventional sign-symbols. And in the sign-signals⁹ (which can be both natural and conventional) the function of transmission-communication is dominant. 5) Natural signedness is a universal phenomenon, and natural “self-assignment” also presents a particular phenomenon, conventional signedness, which exists only in linguistic-semantic systems in a narrow sense. 6) Significance is an intuitive flow directed from the object to the subject, while meaning is a flow in the opposite direction. 7) Every sign is an object, and every object is a sign, as objects are always the respective subject’s correlate; and being for the subject means meaning something for it. 8) Every structure and every process has the following four levels or stages: syncretism or sameness of oppositions, analysis or confrontation of oppositions, synthesis or reunion of oppositions, and super-synthesis or combination of all of the previous stages¹⁰. In the last principle, we can see the further development of Hegel’s famous triad. Following Husserl’s method of “epoché,” Atayan tries to imagine a world where signs are excluded, and he comes to the conclusion that in such world consciousness would become like a monad without windows (a head without eyes and ears). As the essential element of the sign is significance, nothing would have significance, and no meaning would be put in anything. This image seems too gloomy, but Atayan

⁹ In both cases the words are correct, Atayan himself added in brackets these equivalents of the Armenian words: sign-symptoms, sign-symbols and sign-signals

¹⁰ Eduard Atayan, *Sign and Signedness: Three Mental Experiments of Molding the World*, in: Eduard Atayan, *Soul and Freedom. Articles and Translations*, S. Khachents publishing house, Yerevan 2005, pp. 299-300 (in Armenian).

finds that “life in the twentieth century, as it approaches the threshold of dissociation, is not so far from the prehistoric chaos of cosmic non-signedness.”¹¹ In the next mental experiment Atayan tries to imagine a world without non-signedness. Excluding non-signedness, he sees that there is an absolute singularity of cognition, with pressure from its one-sided “paternal” principle and a total absence of “maternal” principle of substance. The incoming picture is no less terrifying than the previous one: a headless body is replaced by a bodiless head. In the picture presented by Atayan we can see the world of simulacra described by Jean Baudrillard. From these two extremes Atayan comes to the agreement of two principles: the principle of universal signedness, a pansemiotism and the principle of non-semiotism. This allows to reunify the world in its division into object and subject, and existence in condition of “war of all against all.” So, the solution is the agreement of these two movements from subject to object and from object to subject, which means submitting subjective whims and fancies to the requirements of objective circumstances. In this case significance as an objective aspiration will outgrow the origination of meaning, subjective intention; and meaning will become the final form of widening significance in the context of world existence. In this way obscurity of set significance will be conquered by transparency of meaning; and the frivolity of softened meaning will be equilibrated by the self-concentration of significance¹².

Atayan distinguishes the wise of ancient times and modern intellectuals. He mentions that for the former the microcosm was analogical to the macrocosm; conversely the latter does not exist in the world as a holistic vision, where everything is integrated within a syncretic unity, but simply in the world of judgments, where the content of the object is separated from the subject who attempts to recognize the object through infinite mental efforts¹³. To overcome the limitations of such a world of intellect, Atayan supports the principle of *pan-analogism*, whereby “The ancients obviously saw that *everything* is analogical to *everything*; analogy was for them not only an epistemological principle or gnoseological method, but an ontological co-relation.”¹⁴ Using the notion of *pananalogism* he explains the four “structural levels” of the human being, to wit: (1) the *body* with its mechanisms of sensual-cognitive reflection and emotional-volitional or transformative influence on the object; (2) *the soul and feeling* with its mechanisms of empathy and suggestive influence towards the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 305.

¹² Ibid., p. 319.

¹³ See Eduard Atayan, *Illness of the Healthy: Characterology and Typology of Non-Freedom*, S. Khachents publishing house, Yerevan 1997, pp. 5-8 (in Russian).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

inner nature/condition of the object; (3) *reason*, with its mechanisms for the mental construction of the object's essential skeleton and mental-volitional decisions concerning the reconstruction of the latter. And, eventually, there is the final level that covers the previous three, actually (4) *I or self-consciousness* with the mechanisms that hold the whole as such and that manage life and different moments of the whole¹⁵. *I* is the one that realizes its own consciousness and transforms it into self-consciousness, and there is no direct cognition or willpower of an empirical object, as *I* is merely a transcendental precondition or a pure impulse for the cognition and willpower; *I* is an objectless reflection (simple ability of cognition) or intention (simple ambition to volition). *I* is the supreme center; the *soul* is the medium between the supreme *I* and the peripheral *mind*, *reason*, and *body*; and in each level, all elements give balance to each other. Unbalance in these levels or of their different moments causes "illnesses of the healthy" that will be described below. Atayan here turns to the problem of freedom.

According to him, world harmony is internally connected with freedom, and freedom is nothing else but harmony between spirit and matter¹⁶. In Pythagoras' times human association with such harmony was itself presupposed and accepted unconditionally. Atayan continues, that in the following centuries freedom was understood on the one hand as freedom of spirit from matter (Luciferian, one-sided, light-oriented principle), and on the other hand as freedom of matter as a forming power (Ahrimanic¹⁷ one-sided, darkness-oriented principle). But as it passes through such trials now, humanity has an opportunity to achieve freedom consciously by means of reinvention of world harmony¹⁸. True freedom neither is a breaking away of spirit from matter nor is it repletion of matter by spirit (transformation of matter into ideology); instead, freedom as such is the interpenetration of these two cosmic principles where free spirit exists freely in the real dimensions of the world through the active mediation of matter. This materialized freedom or freed materialness turns the world into something analogous to artistic creation—the living symbol of which is the embodiment of God in the Earth. The world is free as a totality, and any element of such totality (be it a dead atom or a living monad) is free either if it does not contradict with the comprehension of world harmony, the cosmic project in which each individual party is as necessary for God as God is necessary for the individual¹⁹. Here

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Eduard Atayan, *Freedom and Symbolization*, in: Eduard Atayan, *Soul and Freedom*, p. 114.

¹⁷ Ahriman, Zoroastrian deity.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ In Armenian the third-person pronoun only has one form that can be translated as he/she/it.

Atayan continues the tradition of David the Invincible, the fifth- and sixth-century Armenian neo-Platonic thinker.

Atayan presents free life as a harmony, as a fusion/diffusion of consonant and dissonant flows under the sign of consonance; yet disharmony as non-freedom, is the same synthesis, but under the sign of dissonance. In harmony the free being, so to speak, the master of freedom (a human in his or her highest earthly manifestation) acts as an artist synthesizing downward inflow from above and responding to it upwardly, connecting inherited from the wise times improvisation with the calculation, input by the intellectual modernity²⁰. Harmony is inseparable from freedom as its dynamic aspect and psychological environment in the sense of inner non-constraint and outer openness. Disharmony characterizes non-freedom, which is an illness of the soul and world, though Atayan admits that absolute freedom is an island in the ocean of non-freedom²¹. He thinks that the possibility of freedom for human beings is based on creativity, love, and self-sacrifice. According to him, freedom, love, and self-sacrifice are the three following stages of a faraway future when corresponding features that now are emerging sporadically among many people or constantly among a small amount of them, in the case of normal development of the world, will become the usual forms of human existence and behavior²². But nowadays we face an unhealthy situation and the lack of a sane society, as Erich Fromm has noticed as well. Approaching the problem of freedom from a different viewpoint, Atayan also speaks about a disease of modern people which he calls *eleftherit*, an inflammation of freedom. According to him, people being healthy at a first glance, instead have a disease which has different manifestations, such as: “the prison of sensuality,” “the cage of judgment,” “the cloister of feeling,” and “the concentration camp of *I*.” Each manifestation of *eleftherit* is connected with hypertrophy of the corresponding structural level of the human being and underdevelopment of the other levels. Maya #1, “the prison of sensuality,” results from hypertrophy of the body and sensuality as well as by underdevelopment of reason and of the *I*. Maya #2, “the cage of judgment,” results from hypertrophy of reason and underdevelopment of sensuality and feelings. Maya #3, “the cloister of feeling” emerges when feeling is concentrated on the self, ignoring the voices of reason and will. The fourth Maya, “the concentration camp of *I*,” takes place when the empirical *I* loses connection with the transcendental *I* and represses its own sensuality, reason,

²⁰ See Eduard Atayan, *Illness of the Healthy: Characterology and Typology of Non-freedom*, S. Khachents publishing house, Yerevan 1997, p. 19 (in Russian).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²² Eduard Atayan, *The Soul and Its Manifestations: Possibilities, Probabilities, Compulsorities, and Desirabilities*, Evidentis, Moscow 2012, p. 40 (in Russian).

and/or feeling, instead of helping these elements to be in harmony with each other. In this case *I* is not a regulator, an axis constructing the wholeness of the self; it loses connection with the whole—the universe—and concentrates just in the limits of narrow individuality, maniacally maintaining a personal ego²³. Calling this type of *eleftherit* “*egomania*,” Atayan states that such a disease is a sign of absence of culture, as culture is simply freedom and freedom is culture of self-disclosure towards the world and an attempt to disclose the world towards the self. The danger of digression from the path of freedom is constant, so from time to time each person, couple, family, nation, and other group should ask themselves whether they are deviating from the way of freedom and if they suffer the illness of a certain type of non-freedom. This care should be constant and everlasting as a necessary step toward self-liberation and salvation. Atayan speaks of the will to freedom or the will to liberation from manifestations of non-freedom as being a necessary starting point for individuals, groups, and nations. Explaining the meaning of independence, Atayan states that the nation should become a master of its identity and destiny and a self-centered subject completely responsible for its own behavior²⁴.

Synthesizing some results from Western and Eastern thinking traditions, Atayan comes to the notion of the cross, the vertical axis of which consists of the spirit (Brahman), the soul/nature *I* (Atman), and matter (Maya) proceeding from top to bottom and the essence *I* (Brahman), the soul/ nature *I* (Atman) and the phenomenon *I* (Maya).

Spirit (Brahman)



Essence *I* (Brahman) - Soul/nature *I* (Atman) - Matter (Maya)



Phenomenon *I* (Maya)

²³ See Eduard Atayan, *Illness of the Healthy: Characterology and Typology of Non-Freedom*, S. Khachents Publishing House, Yerevan 1997, p. 98-121 (in Russian).

²⁴ Eduard Atayan, *The Meaning of Independence*, S. Khachents Publishing House and Printinfo, Yerevan 2010, p. 27 (in Armenian).

In the center of the cross is the soul or the nature *I* (Atman), the human being with a unique situation of being finite and infinite, fated, and free at the same time²⁵. Atayan underlines that all of these are constituents of the super-nature – *I*, or supreme Atman.

Atayan thinks of nations and their historical places in a manner analogous to this. He outlines another cross, where, in the vertical axis, he places five moments: spiritual, public, psychic, vital, and, finally, physical (natural) moment. Horizontally we (the Armenian nation) are placed between the individual spirit of a nation (the West) and universal spirit as seen from the national point of view (the East). So Armenia is situated in the crossroads of civilizations, giving to the Armenian special possibilities. Presenting the gloomy situation of the Soviet past, and trying to outline the lessons learned from the realities of the twentieth century, Atayan hopes that the Armenian nation, attempting to become free after the collapse of the old regime, is at the treshold of a spiritual journey. Yet this requires the everyday effort of individuals to overcome the diseases of the age and to reach a state of harmony existing in the center of “Our Cross” where the reunion of the divine-paternal (India, the East) and the human-filial (Europe, the West) will take place under the theo-anthropo-pneumatological maxim of their wholeness²⁶.

²⁵ See Eduard Atayan, *Soul, World-view, Everyday Life*, in: Eduard Atayan, *Soul and Freedom: Articles and Translations*, S. Khachents Publishing House, Yerevan 2005, p. 333 (in Armenian).

²⁶ Eduard Atayan, *Our Cross*, in: Eduard Atayan, *Soul and Freedom. Articles and Translations*, S. Khachents publishing house, Yerevan 2005, p. 241 (in Armenian).

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