

The Life and Work of Ksenija Atanasijević (1894–1981) – Psychology and Anthropology as the Inevitability and Necessity of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Ksenija Atanasijević (1894–1981) was the first woman in Serbia to obtain a Ph.D. in philosophy. Going through numerous psychological metamorphoses in her lifetime and confronted with numerous challenges, Ksenija Atanasijević developed a specific philosophical-psychological system of consolation prominently featuring the concepts of happiness, bliss, moderation, courage and wisdom. Modifying the original teachings of Democritus and Epicurus, Ksenija Atanasijević developed a distinctive anthropology based on confrontation with but equally the overcoming of obstacles, both internal (spiritual) as well as external ones. The philosopheress developed a reflexive and indeed metaphysical defensive psychotherapeutical skill at the root of which was cleansing the soul, as well as dedication to the realm of fancy, fantasy and imagination. Ksenija Atanasijević also had precious literary talent which was best expressed in her analyses of the poetry and prose of great Serbian writers (Pandurović, Njegoš, Nastasijević, etc.). It is quite certain that this, with Anica Savić-Rebac, definitely greatest Serbian philosopheress, through personal suffering, creative solitude and shrouded desperation built an utterly authentic and harmonious system of philosophical comfort.

Key words: *Ksenija Atanasijević, anthropology, psychology, philosophy of comfort, female philosopher*

*The first sign that man has started to respect himself is his emancipation from ignorance
Ksenija Atanasijević – Fragments, 1929*

Introduction

Ksenija Atanasijević, perhaps the most prominent Serbian philosopheress besides Anica Savić-Rebac, formed her philosophical thought through her personal life struggle and endeavor as well as through countless tribulations, Tantalian and painful, imposed on a woman of reason by unreasonable and chauvinist pressures, of the kind that were quite widespread during her lifetime, but in no way justified. As she experienced psychological metamorphoses along her life path, all those trials came to acquire a practical meaning to be translated into a resolute outlook on life. Hence her philosophy features psychology in large measure and vice versa, the two being intertwined into an unbreakable whole.

Her philosophical curiosity was initially inspired by the works of our greatest philosopher Branislav Petrović, the melancholy and ingenious Božidar Knežević, but also by the works of the literary and poetic titans Dostoevsky and Njegoš. All these motivated her to enroll at Belgrade University to study philosophy and to graduate with highest distinction at the »pure philosophy with applied philosophical disciplines and classical languages« stream.

Profoundly interested in the work and opus of the Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno, she soon embarked on preparing her doctoral thesis on the subject of his perhaps most mystical work, »De triplici minimo«

(On the Triple Minimum). To best grasp the intricacies of this work of a quite impervious style she spent time in Geneva and Paris tutored by the most eminent professors of the period. In Belgrade in 1922 (at the age of 28), she defended her doctoral dissertation under the title »Bruno's Teaching on the Minimum« with the highest grade, thus becoming the first woman in Serbia to acquire the title of doctor of philosophical sciences. Her appointment as assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade marked the beginning of her activity as teacher and scholar.

Psychological-Anthropological Roots of Philosophical Thought

In her studies, Ksenija Atanasijević was particularly interested in Hellenic philosophy. She has written a number of works about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Pythagoreans and Epicurus. She was interested in the Ionic philosophy of nature as well as in the ancient Greek Atomist philosophy and Democritus. It is the ethical reflections of the Hellenes that may well have in largest measure shaped Ksenija Atanasijević's moral but equally anthropological-psychological attitudes. Thus she believes that in Heraclitus' ethics, measure, which actually expresses a mathematical form of cosmic and ethical harmony, represents the yardstick of man's morality and happiness because it reflects the presence of divine fire in man's soul. An indicator of its presence is action in accordance with the laws of the Logos, of the governing principle of reason. The more moist the soul, the greater the possibility for ignorance, lust and passions, but also the more difficult the struggle between mind and heart¹. Only by self-knowledge and sober thinking can the soul be made better, and sober thinking is the greatest of virtues. For Democritus, the ethical doctrine is in the form of eudaimonism, namely the objective of life is happiness which consists of a feeling of pleasure and the avoidance of pain and is achieved by relinquishing passionate emotions and establishing the serenity of the soul. Democritus clearly distinguishes between the external and the internal good and believes that commitment to the internal values, i.e. virtue, is the only road to achieving peace of the soul, i.e. happiness. Passions are in his opinion pernicious and a balanced moral life is achieved by man not undertaking much in either his private or communal life, or if he does undertake something, it should not exceed his potentials. Want and excess are according to him extremes which oppose the acquisition of virtue, and equality of spiritual serenity. Ksenija Atanasijević maintains that Democritus' exceeding the measure (balance) constitutes one of the principal causes of unhappiness². It goes without saying that Socrates' ethics deeply influenced Atanasijević's later philosophical-anthropological stances³. Socrates' »Know thyself« contains the lesson of an intellectual ethics of the equality of knowledge and good. Knowledge is not only the condition of morality but actually its essence. According to Socrates virtue can be learned, and it is not something that we get from with-

out, but is built by self-knowledge and self-restraint. Nothing is stronger than reason and that is why it is best suited to govern. According to Socrates the best lives are of those who seek to improve themselves as much as they can, and evil is the consequence of the failure to improve upon human nature.

On the path to founding her distinct Philosophy of Consolation, Ksenija Atanasijević was particularly interested in the notion and concept of bliss which in the ethics of Antiquity was equalized with happiness⁴. Ksenija Atanasijević apologetically subscribed to primarily the teachings of Democritus and Epicurus in this respect. The basis of Democritus' ethics is the imperative for men to engage in spiritual work more, so that the soul might be capable of rectifying the weaknesses of the body. His fragments, which Ksenija Atanasijević cites, are famous: »The best way for a man to lead his life is to have been as cheerful as possible and to have suffered as little as possible. This could happen if one did not seek one's pleasures in mortal things« (frg.189), or »Men find happiness neither by means of the body nor through possessions, but through uprightness and wisdom« (frg.40). For Atanasijević, in keeping with Democritus' ethics, happiness is achieved by way of »temperance, an awareness of duty, good and pure intentions, a solid moral character, relinquishment of sensual pleasures and an intensive spiritual life«.

Ksenija Atanasijević particularly valued Epicurus' teaching on happiness, believing that this sage wished to secure for himself a permanently bearable mental status but at the same time teach others how to steer clear of all the cataclysms brought by life's disruptions and ailments⁵. She clearly saw through the old prejudice according to which Epicurus' teaching incited sensual and dissolute behavior. That sensualist hedonism was not in question is quite clear, because Epicurus' emphasis on the physical stemmed from his constant bodily sufferings, and he held that the aspiration for pleasure derived from a feeling of pain, and that when there was no suffering, no such need was felt either. Epicurus set much greater store by internal peace than by bodily pleasure. Therefore in respect of him also she considers virtues like temperance, courage and wisdom worthy inasmuch as they relate to satisfaction as their consequence.

Consequently, in her work Atanasijević states that Epicurus: »by his moderateness, his overcoming of severe physical pains and passions and by his serenity, was the first to attain the ideal of the sage that he had conceived of«.

The Philosophy of Consolation as a Distinct Philosophical Psychotherapy

Living her life in conformity with her philosophical-psychological doctrine, Ksenija Atanasijević developed her, truth to tell, to a certain extent reflective and metaphysical defensive psychotherapeutical skill. In the face of a multitude of contretemps, resistances, misunderstandings, painful experiences, she gradually devel-

oped a philosophical-anthropological-psychological concept – a course to overcome obstacles, both internal (spiritual) as well as external ones. In so doing she was aided not only by her knowledge of philosophical ethics but also by her splendid knowledge of literature and folk wisdom. Although she had great respect for philosophers of pessimism like Schopenhauer, she strove to find in the darkness of life bright spots which would at least relatively justify her existence. She rejects Schopenhauer's blind will as the basic principle of a painful existence and seeks to create in the ocean of man's tragic existence at least some consolatory basis of being. Considering that it is impossible by logic to grasp the supreme truth, she finds a way out in the assumption of the existence of God, eternity, immortality and cosmic justice⁶. These imaginary, but also metaphysical pillars are, according to Atanasijević, the consequence of man's dissatisfaction with his restricted earthly circumstances, but are also a reflection of eternity in him. She maintains that the first step to well-being and happiness is cleansing the soul of malice, evil and other vices. The more cleansed the soul, the closer it is to a genuine feeling of happiness and bliss, which is very close to Hindu beliefs. To expose the bright internal reserves one must shake off the fetters of banality and step into the realm of fantasy, fancy, intuition, namely imagination. Her concept is so explicit and »principled that she feels that is even better to accept illusions and deceptions than stand before the hurtful truth«. Ksenija Atanasijević maintains that transcendence and mystical experiences prompted by imagination can bring about the harmony and beauty of imagined worlds and not to seek their realization in the this-worldly. Pessimism can be overcome by ecstasy and pleasures of the highest spiritual illumination precisely by the flight of fancy.

Ksenija Atanasijević also devoted herself to the relationship between death and immortality. Her thinking resides upon the principles of Hindu philosophy, the teachings of Socrates and Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Empedocles, but also Kant and her teacher Branislav Petronijević. Thus she finds a series of spiritual, ontological as well as ethical reasons attesting to the immortality of the soul. As a paradigm of her perception of the immortality of the soul we quote the following fragment: »Our existence cannot be the beginning or the end, because death is ephemeral, if the ingredients of the world are spiritual and indestructible«.

Also interesting are her thoughts about the phenomenon of suicide. Considerations of suicide have several levels – the religious, the anthropological-sociological, the psychological-psychiatric and the philosophical one. Of philosophers, Hegesias, Socrates, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Locke and Kant have written about suicide⁷. In her work on suicide, Ksenija Atanasijević examines and reviews the perceptions of the Cyreniacs and the Stoics⁸. She does not pronounce any absolute judgement on the (un)justifiability of suicide, except for maintaining that the soul is immortal and that it has to be purified, including through sin, suffering and pain. The soul evol-

ves aspiring after perfection, grappling in the process with all conceivable earthly hurdles. Even though she does not explicitly say so, it is clear that the ethical doctrine of Ksenija Atanasijević is against suicide as a means of achieving happiness and bliss, for on its way to perfection, the soul must pass through a series of perturbations and introspections, otherwise it will remain ultimately incomplete and imperfect in the spiritual sense.

Ksenija Atanasijević was abundantly literarily gifted so that is no wonder that even the famous Škerlić referred to her as the philosopher writer. Her role as the »philosopher preacher« and interpreter of philosophical systems is obvious from her series of popular, but in no way trivial, lectures and articles about great philosophers. She analyzed poetry and prose – she was enchanted with Njegoš, Nastasijević, Pandurović, Đura Jakšić, recognizing in their thoughts many of her own reflections.

Ksenija Atanasijević suffered an academic injustice. Following her critical review of a work on Kant, the author of which was Nikola Popović, a professor at Belgrade University, the (pseudo) scientific philosophical community, led precisely by the mentioned author of the work on Kant swooped upon her as an avalanche. Regrettably, instead of a free and fluid philosophical-critical repartee between Atanasijević and Popović, this turned into an academic scandal with the »expulsion« of Ksenija Atanasijević and her dismissal from her chair. She was accused of plagiarism and that her works were not original. The public, frankly, was divided. Supporting her and stressing the academic hypocrisy and cynicism were, for instance, Sima Pandurović and philosophy professor Momčilo Ivanić as well as the »Association of University-Educated Women«⁴. Nonetheless, all that proved insufficient. Pettiness and male traditionalism (chauvinism) won in the then official Serbian philosophical establishment. Following this embarrassment Ksenija Atanasijević became even more of a recluse devoting herself intently to her philosophy of consolation.

Analyzing her spiritual life, contemplating her frustrations, the obstacles in her social and professional life, and incorporating her own ethical code, Ksenija Atanasijević writes about phenomena such as envy, cynicism, thirst for glory, intrigue, rising above trivial interpretations and crude repartee. For curiosity's sake, exceptionally interesting and deserving a deeper anthropological and psychological analysis and structuring is her division into: the schemer-fool, the schemer-inquisitor and the schemer-blackmailer⁹.

The philosopheress also describes her own mechanisms of defense against these extremely immoral products of vain and conceited spirits which engender utterly dissonant human relations. Depending on the maturity of the human soul, Atanasijević maintains that a number of stances can be adopted in relation to evil and wicked people: forgetting, enduring or forgiving. She also holds that silence is the virtue of the mature person, and serenity the regal feeling of the soul. A fighting spirit is in the view of Atanasijević consistency and conduct towards

others without concessions. Those who »fear us leave us alone. And it is definitely, more acceptable to be a despot, than to expire, entangled in humiliation and defeats«¹⁰. In one of the fragments, Ksenija advises a total estrangement from people and hermetization in a world of ideal relationships: »Pure relations exist only as an idea...it would therefore be the most expedient if we remained surrounded by a void and if no one forced us to socialize. We would sow less misery in ourselves and others«.

She analyzes defense mechanisms, truly not in the classical psychodynamic or psychoanalytical sense, although it is known that Ksenija Atanasijević was well versed in the works of Sigmund Freud and the individual psychology of Alfred Adler. Scrutiny of these, psychological maneuvers as it were, reveals a degree of idiosyncrasy, subjectivism. The somewhat solipsistic explanations of these defensive psychological acts, however, feature a degree of pragmatism, and it is certain that many readers can find, if not complete consolation, at least the possibility to understand and then to transcend some of their life's difficulties. In these psychological analyses, Ksenija Atanasijević, in addition to subjectivism, solipsism, hyperreflectivity, and in fact occasional naiveté, still provides realistic foundations upon which to build a system of basic support in which pessimistically structured persons can find some comfort and harmony. It is certain that the psychological scrutiny of diverse existential, phenomenological and anthropological issues by Dr Ksenija Atanasijević also included the field of metaphysics and ethics whereby she consolidated her pursuit of unifying psychology and philosophy as a spiritual whole.

Despite the abundance of psychotherapeutical streams and techniques – in 1980 Herinck identified at least 250 types of psychotherapy and in 1986 Karasu somewhat over 400, today a specific philosophical therapy is already recognized^{11,12}. Martin Buber, Silvano Arieti, then Viktor

Frankl, Rollo May and Jean Paul Sartre are the founding fathers of this approach.

It would be very pretentious to proclaim Ksenija Atanasijević their forerunner or peer, but with her multi-layered philosophical processing of psychological themes and psychologization (definitely not with a negative connotation) of philosophy, she was one of those personalities who courageously came to grips with this eclectic subject matter and blazed the trail to new constellations of humanistic hermeneutics.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Ksenija Atanasijević is certainly not a philosophical anarchist or deconstructivist. On the contrary, she is a moderate and totally objective ethicist and a prominent Serbian moralist. Her ideational commitment is crystal clear. Psychology proceeds from philosophy rather than *vice versa*. That is her ideational and a priori *conditio sine qua non* which she always abided by. In her monograph on Ksenija Atanasijević, Ružica Petrović maintains: »Her ethics was not only part of her practical philosophy but also part of her wisdom which came to expression at all important junctures of her existence and which manifested and confirmed its positive effect on the example of her longevity, fruitful work and dignified demeanor«. Perhaps Ksenija Atanasijević's philosophical and psychological considerations have an overtone of »autism«, a solipsism which emanated from the philosopher's personal painful experience, but it proved a great challenge and intellectual stimulus, as with her analog on in art and fate, Frida Kahlo, for her to develop through personal suffering, creative solitude and an uncommon shrouded desperation her utterly authentic and harmonious system of philosophical comfort.

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ŽIVOT I RAD KSENIJE ATANASIJEVIĆ (1894.–1981.) – PSIHOLOGIJA I ANTROPOLOGIJA KAO NEIZBJEŽNOST I POTREBA FILOZOFIJE

S A Ž E T A K

Ksenija Atanasijević (1894.–1981.) prva je žena u Srbiji s doktoratom iz filozofije. Prolazeći kroz brojne psihološke metamorfoze u vlastitom životu i suočena s brojnim izazovima, Ksenija Atanasijević razvila je poseban filozofsko-psihološki sustav utjehe kojeg karakteriziraju koncepti sreće, blaženstva, umjerenosti, hrabrosti i mudrosti. Modificarna izvorna učenja Demokrita i Epikura, Ksenija Atanasijević razvila je posebnu antropologiju na temelju sukoba, ali s jednakim svladavanjem prepreka, unutarnjih (duhovnih), kao i vanjskih. Filozofkinja je razvila refleksivnu i istinski metafizičko-obrambenu psihoterapijsku vještinu u korijenu koje je čišćenje duše, kao i predanost svijetu fantazije, mašte i imaginacije. Ksenija Atanasijević također je imala dragocjeni književni talent, koji je najbolje izrazila u svojim analizama poezije i proze velikih srpskih pisaca (Pandurović, Njegoš, Nastasijević, itd.). Sasvim je izvjesno da je, s Anicom Savić-Rebac, definitivno najveća srpska filozofkinja, kroz osobne patnje, kreativnu samoću i prožimajući čemer, izgradila posve autentičan i skladan sustav filozofijske utjehe.