

The following is an abridged version of “Cosmology of the Spirit” by Ewald Ilyenkov. This essay dates from the 1950s, but was only published in the 1980s because it was judged to be too as it was too heretical to be published before the author’s death. Described by the author as a “Philosophical-Poetic Phantasmagoria”, the essay is a highly speculative vision that offers up a beautiful and tragic picture concerning the vocation of thought. Namely to eventually sacrifice itself to nature in an altruistic act that offers rebirth the universe.

Thought is undoubtedly the highest product of universal development, is the highest stage of organizing interactions.

Thought is the supreme product of the development of the universe. In it, in the birth of the thinking brain, universal matter attains such a degree after which all possibilities of further development “above” are exhausted.

“All that exists is worthy of destruction,” [in other words] each “finite” form of existence has its beginning and its end. This condition is applicable both to the present solar planetary system, as it is to the humankind inhabiting it.

It’s clear that sometime in the dark future of times to come, humanity will cease to exist and that the eternal flow of motion of the Universe will, at long last, wash away and wipe out all traces of human culture. Earth itself will be scattered into the dust of cosmic space and will be dissolved into the eternal big circle of universal matter.

Before this happens (a distant and practically indifferent prospect for us) millions of years will have passed, hundreds of thousands of generations will have peopled the earth and gone to their graves. But time moves inexorably toward that time when the thinking spirit on Earth fades out, in order to be reborn again somewhere else in another part of the eternal Universe.

The genesis and development and death of humankind is objectively predicated on this infinite system of interaction—in it, in its understanding one must search for the sense and role of humankind in the Universe—look for the solution to this question that, in its idealistic expression sounds like the issue of the highest, of the final aim of human existence.

The fact that the sun and the planets will cool in time is indisputable. Yet surely humankind (and in the future this will be all the more true) will cease to be the obedient toy of external circumstances. Its power increases from year to year. Humankind will find ever newer, ever more contemporary means to liberate the reserves of heat, movement, energy accumulated in other forms apart from direct solar radiation. The further humankind develops, the more and the deeper the energy hoards (the deeper they are hidden and the more concentrated they are accumulated, the more powerful they are) will be revealed before it, transforming them into the condition for its existence...

But that which humankind (thinking matter in general) is not in a condition to endure, in spite of its power over nature (whatever the level that this power reaches) is the opposite state of universal matter to the cold of intergalactic space, a state toward which the evolution of the world leads it just as inevitably as to that of cooling: the fiery-incandescent “youth” of cosmic matter, the state of incandescent gas of the young, engendered nebula, a starting point for a new cosmic cycle.

This fiery-vaporous condition in which all elements are transformed into wildly rotating vortices and where it is fundamentally impossible to preserve any artificially created borders at all, from behind which humans could hide, no arbitrarily durable and heat-resistant “husk,” capable of separating an artificial environment from that which remains, from the “non-humanized” world, evidently turns out to be that absolute border beyond which the existence of thinking matter is already impossible.

Maybe humankind is able to avoid death in the ice-covered planet. This is a prospect that is fundamentally possible. But no efforts will save it from death in the hurricane of global “fire” that, at some point, will return the volcanic youth to our global island.

We have established that the question of the death of the thinking brain cannot be resolved outside the conditions created by the development of the cosmic systems, within which flow the history of thinking spirit’s development, and we have come to the conclusion that the absolute inevitability of this death coincides with the beginning of the fiery rebirth of worlds perishing from “thermal death.”

All the celestial bodies and systems known to science, gradually (through emission) lose the reserves of their internal energy, and lose them irrevocably, gradually cooling in the vain attempt to heat at least to a billionth part of a degree of its surrounding environment. In so doing, the moving matter of the warmed celestial bodies disperse equally into intergalactic space, turning into cold vapors formed of ice, the temperature of which is comparable to absolute zero and only differs from it in its vanishingly small size. The process connected with the emission of heat in the universal space, can, at this point, be deemed irrevocable, moreover absolutely irrevocable, so that it seems that there is a tendency toward the fact that the entire universal matter with its intrinsic motion is shared in absolutely equal parts in the intergalactic sphere and the entire Universe, which as a whole, gradually moves toward a condition of “thermal death,” that is, to that stable equilibrium that excludes every possibility of a reverse transition toward a differentiated state.

Only the process that has a tendency to precisely such a lifeless state of universal matter is known to us, whereas the reverse trend, contradicting the above process, is unknown to us—a process by means of which the reverse reallocation of motion takes place in the Universe—although theoretically it is absolutely clear that such a process does exist, indeed, its existence is not in doubt.

But natural science research has still not yet demonstrated the reverse process—the process of the rebirth of dying worlds, the process of the transformation of ice-covered steam of intergalactic space into incandescent nebula.

An indisputable theoretical conclusion is that such a process through some spontaneous way intrinsic to the very nature of moving matter is continually taking place. Without such a process,

the existing Universe could not be preserved and reproduced in eternity in a natural way, it represents an absolute necessity, inherently posited by the motion of universal matter, a condition for the existence of the Universe.

Why not presuppose that this reverse process takes place with the participation of thinking matter, thinking spirit—as one of the attributes of universal matter—and that without its contribution, without its help, this process would be impossible and inconceivable?

In these circumstances, just as the thinking matter of the brain is the supreme product of universal development so it is reasonable to assume that in the course of the universal big circle, in the mutual transformations of one form of motion of universal matter into others, it has a special place and plays a special role—such a role which cannot be played by other, less complexly organized forms of motion. And this special role, befitting its place in the system of forms of motion of universal matter (as the supreme form of motion) is outlined in our hypothesis.

In real terms this role can be represented thus: Humankind (or some other combination of thinking beings) at some, very high, point of its development— at the point acquired when matter, of more or less vast cosmic spaces within which humankind exists, starts to cool and is close to the condition of so-called thermal death; in this fateful point for matter and in which in some way or other (unknown to us, of course, living at the dawn of the history of human power), consciously facilitates the start of the reverse (in comparison with dispersed motion) process, a process transforming the dying, freezing worlds into the fiery- incandescent hurricane of emerging nebula.

In these conditions, the thinking spirit sacrifices itself and, in this process, is not able to preserve itself. But its sacrifice takes place in the name of its duty to Mother Nature. The human, a thinking spirit, returns its old debt to nature. At some point, in its youth, nature engendered thinking spirit. Now, on the contrary, the thinking spirit, at the cost of its own existence, returns to mother nature, dying of “thermal death,” a new incandescent youth—a state in which it is able once again to start colossal development cycles, which at some point again, at a different point in time and space will once more lead to the emergence of a new thinking brain, a new thinking spirit from its cooling core...

If one assumes that the thinking spirit is born somewhere on the periphery of universal matter only in order for it soon to vanish fruitlessly and without a trace, flaring up for a brief moment on a cooling planet only in order to be extinguished again, leaving in its wake only wrecks of material culture that just as quickly disperse in the Universe the stream of its perpetual motion— if one assumes such a fate for the thinking spirit, then one ends up with a very strange notion of “attribute.” Indeed in this case thought turns out to be something like mould on a cooling planet, something like the senile disease of matter, and certainly not the highest flower of creation, not the highest product of universal world development.

In this case thought, even if it is still called the “the highest flowering” of matter, the flower turns out to be barren—a beautiful but absolutely infertile flower, blossoming somewhere on the periphery of universal development only in order to instantly fade under the icy or the fiery incandescent gust of a hurricane from the infinite Universe [...] All the effective development of universal matter in this case takes place alongside its development, completely autonomous from it, and its appearance has absolutely no influence on the destiny of universal development.

Thought turns into an absolutely infertile episode which, *pari passu*, would also not have happened at all without any detriment to everything else.

There is far more basis to assume that thinking matter, as the highest quality form of motion of universal matter, plays a by no means unimportant role in the process of the universal big circle, a role corresponding to the complexity and the eminence of its organization.

Why not assume in this case, that thought is precisely that most qualitatively peak form in which is realized the accumulation and productive use of energy, emitted by the suns?

Why not presuppose that matter in its development specifically creates with the aid, and in the form, of the thinking brain those same conditions, in the presence of which the emitted energy from the sun isn't fruitlessly wasted on the simple heating of universal space, but accumulates into the qualitatively highest form of its existence, and then is used like a "rigger hook," as a detonator, originating the process of reverse rebirth of dying worlds in the form of incandescent nebula?

In concrete terms, one can imagine it like this: At some peak point of their development, thinking beings, executing their cosmological duty and sacrificing themselves, produce a conscious cosmic catastrophe— provoking a process, a reverse "thermal dying" of cosmic matter; that is, provoking a process leading to the rebirth of dying worlds by means of a cosmic cloud of incandescent gas and vapors.

The highest and final goal of the existence of the thinking spirit turns out to be cosmic and grand as well as sublime and wonderful. It differs from other hypotheses concerning the end of humankind not in that, through this end, it puts to an end universal death (perishing, death, destruction represent an absolutely necessary result in any hypothesis); but only that death is outlined by it not as a senseless and fruitless end but as an act which in its essence is a creative one, as a prelude to a new cycle of life for the Universe.

The suggested hypothesis sets itself apart with the advantage that the death of humankind (and the thinking spirit in general) stands in this light not as senseless, as in any other possible hypothesis, but as justified as an absolutely necessary act from the perspective of the universal big circle of universal matter, developing according to its objective laws.

In this light thought appears as not only the highest and most wonderful flower of the universe, but also a flower which is not infertile, as a flower that through its death, engenders an absolutely necessary fruit, resulting from the perspective of the universal big circle.

The death of the thinking spirit becomes a genuinely creative act, an action that transforms the freezing deserts of intergalactic space, immersed in gloom, into rotating masses of incandescent, bright, warm sunny worlds; a system that becomes the cradle of new life, a new dawn of the thinking spirit, immortal like matter itself.

The death of the thinking spirit becomes, in this way, its immortality. And somewhere again—in the endlessly distant future—new beings in which nature evolves a thinking spirit, will (like us today) contemplate the worlds of stars, shining in the sky of their earth,, with the proud consciousness that these worlds owe their existence to a once vanishing thinking spirit, its great and fine victim.

In the radiance of the starry sky, the thinking being will see a testimony to the power and beauty of the immortal even in the death of its thinking spirit—objectified, sensually perceptible, but not calling into any doubt its own power over the sensible world. The starry sky, just like the entire surrounding nature, will be for the thinking being a mirror in which it will reflect its own infinite nature. Through the glowing of the stars, the thinking spirit will be spoken to (in a language understood only by him), the immortal thinking spirit eternally revived in its products. And in the contemplation of eternal nature, man (like every thinking being) will feel a pride in itself, of the cosmic scale of its own universal and historical mission; the place and role of the thinking being in the system of universal interaction.

Conscious of the colossal scale of its role in the universe, the human being discovers also the high sensation of their highest purpose; the highest goals of its existence in the world. Its activity is filled with new pathos, before which the pathetic pathos of religion will fade. This will be a pathos of truth, a pathos of the true consciousness of its objective role in the universal system.

It is clear that to fulfill its universal and historical mission, the thinking spirit will find this condition only during the peak of its development, of its power; to that point which we, people of the twentieth century will obviously not live to see. Millions of years will pass, thousands of generations will be born and go to their graves, a genuine human system will be established on Earth, with the conditions for activity—a classless society, spiritual and material culture will abundantly blossom, with the aid of, and on the basis of, which humankind can only fulfill its great sacrificial duty before nature.

For us, for people living at the dawn of human prosperity, the struggle for this future will remain the only real form of service to the highest aims of the thinking spirit. And to the struggle undertaken today, to the activity nowadays which fulfills our hypothesis, nothing is added to and nothing is removed from it; adding only the proud (and having, for now, a purely aesthetic character) consciousness that the activity of humankind is made spiritual not only by the pathos of “final” human goals, but the fact that it has, as well as these, also a universal and historical meaning, and materializes immortal goals determined by the entire system of universal interaction.