

Keti Chukhrov
**Why Preserve
the Name
“Human”?**

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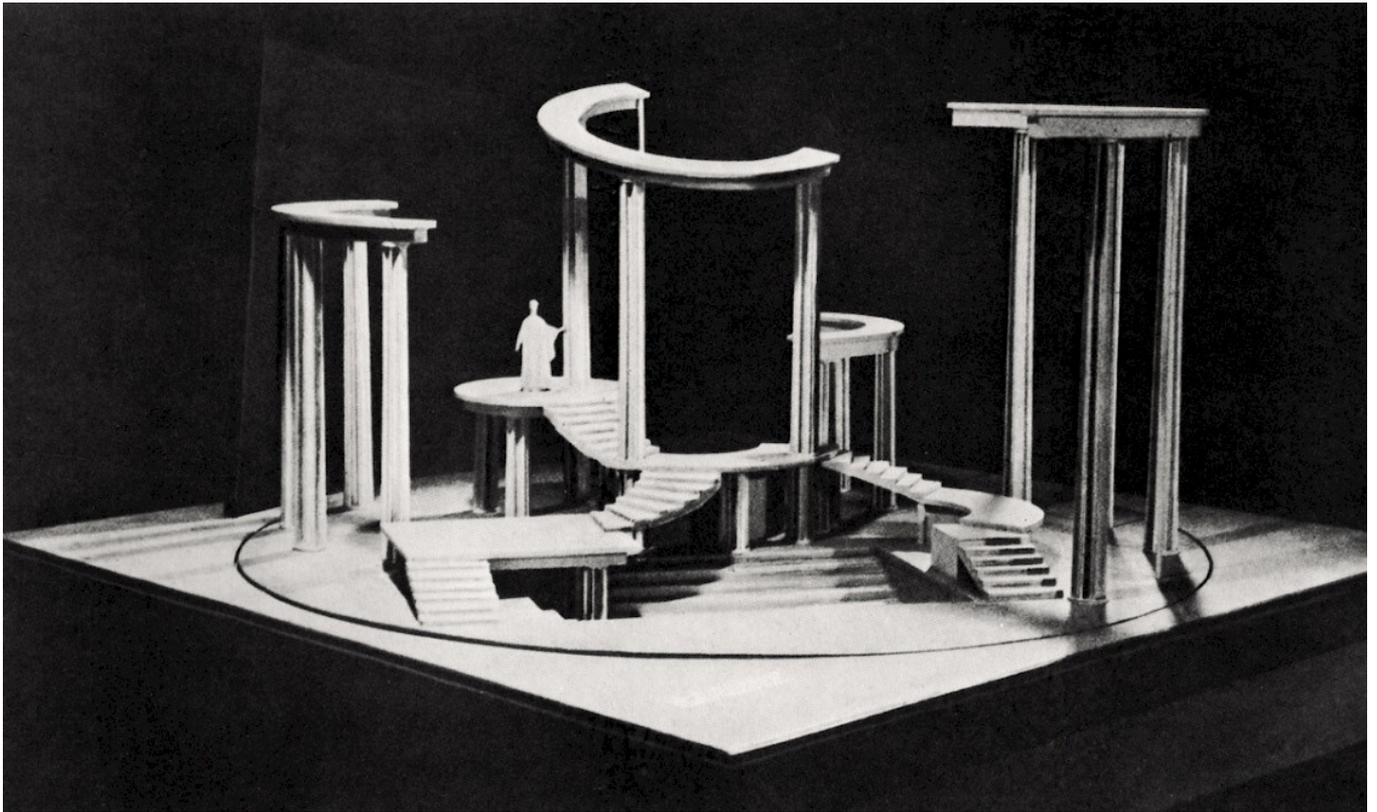
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There are two main motivations for claiming the extinguishing of the human condition. The first one stems from an ethical and evolutionary dismissal of humankind for its atrocities with regard to nature, ecology, society. Anthropocentrism is here considered an obsolete planetary and social paradigm.¹ The second path of claiming a posthumanist or in-humanist condition is actually a Nietzschean overhumanism whose present interpretations and developments are found in contemporary manifestos of accelerationism and speculative realism. It grounds the end of humanity in the incapacities of the human being to exceed cognitive, biological, and social finiteness. This finiteness is caused by individualist, philistine interests preventing human society from competing with technology or abstract and autonomous knowledge, and from overcoming the limits of “folk politics” (Nick Srnicek) or earthly existence. Autonomous knowledge becomes the kernel of speculative realism’s claim that knowledge should be liberated from subject-object correlation and should be able to provide desubjectified, mathematized, utterly scientific descriptions of reality devoid of any philosophical mystification.

However, it was precisely in philosophy that the dimensions beyond human cognition or sense (for instance, with Kant’s sublime or Hegel’s absolute spirit) were considered to be the threshold of human consciousness, while still retaining a universalist dimension as a regulative idea, if not as acquirable knowledge. Philosophy had already claimed the human condition by envisaging all inhuman phenomena as extending human capacities – in terms of knowledge, mind, consciousness, invention, science. But such an extension didn’t make the name “human” collapse. On the contrary, the name “human” was reinforced by these inhuman extensions.

Marx was probably the first to claim that humans had never existed, and that the human condition is the project of a communist future: in his “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” he posits the condition of humanness as yet unrealized and unattainable without the evacuation of private property and the establishment of a communist society. It is by means of human society that it would be possible to create a generic dimension (conditioned mainly by the sublation of private property). Besides, it is only a human being that can “be” not only for oneself but also for other people and other species. The possible answer to Latour from Marx could be that, to attain equality between human and nonhuman agents, one needs precisely human society and human agents.

Some time later, numerous theories,



Isaac Rabinovich, Set for Aristophanes' Comedy *Lysistrata* at the Bakhrushin Theatre Museum, Moscow, 1923.

manifestos, and research projects of the Russian avant-garde envisaged a communist society and constructed conditions of humanness that were often in the vein of the Marxist idea of achieving such a generic dimension of human consciousness under the influence of the communist economy and its social conditions.

The Russian avant-garde geared many of its various experiments towards exceeding human finiteness using radical biogenetic and biosocial transformations of living conditions, sexuality, production, technological acceleration, and cosmist utopias. However, in all the experimental theories and practical endeavors of the Russian avant-garde – in Aleksandr Bogdanov’s bank for blood transfusion to rejuvenate populations, in Malevich’s idea of “white humanity,” in Platonov’s project of overcoming the sex drive, and earlier in Fedorov’s idea of resurrecting humans in the noosphere – the notion of humanness stayed intact.

Meanwhile, the main difference between Russian cosmism or Soviet socialist philosophy and Kantian critique or Hegel’s idealism, or contemporary posthumanist theories, is the following: aspects of the sublime that are simultaneously human and inhuman in German idealism are nevertheless considered to be alien. And the human mind is exactly the tool for extending oneself to such uncomfortable, alienated otherness – as was the core issue of philosophy from Kant to Adorno. Speculative realist, accelerationist, and object-oriented theories dispense with this double-bind construction – the inhumanness within humanness (the fake “beyond” within the human mind) – merely by rejecting the fact that the human mind has any capacity to grasp what is alien: matter, reality or the real, the cosmological ancestry of Earth, the cosmological dimension. Such a condition could be related to the way emancipatory politics is understood in accelerationist theories, where the political change or emancipatory shift is achieved by overriding alienation, which implies accepting its conditions. How can one win over alienation without fully entering that very alienation? It is only out of the technological handling of alienation that it becomes possible to navigate that very alienation.

In early Soviet experiments in the production of humanity, radical social, anthropological, and technical emancipation was gained via a converse procedure – via de-alienation. We all know what de-alienation means in social and economic terms: the end of the division of labor, of class society, of an economy based on surplus value. But on the level of thought, its demand is to stop separating the dimensions of the conceptual, cognitive, ideal,

and general from the realm of the empirical, material, and concrete.

An amazing thing happened with the Russian avant-garde’s neohumanism as well as with Soviet socialist materialist idealism (particularly Evald Ilyenkov). Nothing in the natural, scientific, or anthropogenic transformations they posit involves any sublimity, or any futurological imaginary as alien or as detached from human society. On the contrary, their idea is precisely that human society will follow any scientific breakthroughs, mutations, or even posthuman catastrophes.

One of the important features of such a stance in Soviet thought is the attempt to merge Spinoza with Hegel in some sort of dialectical monism. Such an attempt is already obvious in Russian cosmism – in works by Fedorov, Tsiolkovsky, Vernadsky, and later in Bogdanov’s research on tectology and empiriomonism, or in Platonov’s monist animism. Monism presupposes the convergence of cognitive (abstract) and material (concrete) phenomena. As was already mentioned, the demand here is to fuse matter and concept, the empirical and the ideal. In fact, the gap between the nominal empirical immanent presence and the idea, or the ideal, has always been the central issue for philosophy. For example, in Hegel objective reality in all its negativity is viable but has to be further appropriated by absolute spirit, whereas Ilyenkov overturns Hegel’s scheme in a way reminiscent of Marx. Hegel’s absolute spirit is the anticipation of a specific form of consciousness that is able to merely function as a reflection of the generality of societal matter. If an idea can be implemented, it is not torn from matter, from empirical being. At the same time, a thought resides not in the mind of a human subject, but in objective reality, which in its own turn needs an idea.

In “Cosmology of the Mind” (“Космология духа”), his phantasmagoric treatise, Ilyenkov goes further than any other radical theory of cosmism.² Those other theories envisage the better and the more just existence of humanity initiated by technoscientific and social breakthroughs. For Ilyenkov, the starting point for claiming the human condition is, on the contrary, the complete extinction of life, of humankind, and even of the solar system. He considers the universe to be the “home” of humanity, and the extinction of any existence on Earth or even of the solar system would not stand in the way of hampering the fulfillment of the human condition. Ilyenkov provides his treatise with a long subtitle: “An Attempt to Establish in General Terms the Objective Role of Thinking Matter in the System of Worldly Interacting” – and further in brackets –

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“Philosophic-Poetical Phantasmagoria, Relying on the Principles of Dialectical Materialism.”

The assumptions made in this treatise disavow the issues that became the kernel of speculative realism – that humanity, being just a short phase in the existence of the solar system and matter, is not able to claim any capacity to cognize reality in its absolute dimension.

In Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*, the end of life in the solar system is the condition for claiming human history – and the pretention of a human thought that can correlate itself with the universe – as senseless.³ In the history of thought, inhumanist universalism is only the false projection of a finite human mind unable to grasp existence because reality is absolutely autonomous from human historical or ethical projections. Moreover, this projection does not accommodate notions of death and life, the dead and the living. The history of humanity, its material culture, and the history of human thought can thus be no more than a tiny episode in the life of the universe, and any thought can only serve to mythologize what pure knowledge might be. Knowledge has the attributes of the human mind, but its procedures of cognition and intellect should be externalized and nominalized beyond the domain of the human brain and mind.

Ilyenkov starts by claiming the unity of matter, thought, and human being through two important premises: first, that thought is an attribute of matter (a Spinozist premise), and thus no matter can exist without thought, and vice versa. Thought needs matter, and thought is an extension of matter, since matter has to think, although not directly. Secondly, Ilyenkov claims that thought can only be human thought and not any overhuman intelligence or competence, as in the case of idealist philosophy.

So it is precisely human thought that is the extension of cosmic and planetary matter. Consequently, a human being is a temporary but indispensable part of matter, since thought finds its material realization in the human being. It should be noted that matter in this case is not just a nominal static substance, but the substance that develops, according to Marx, into the labor and sociality of which the thought is a part.

The assumption that there is something better developed for the practice of thought than a thinking human brain can lead to allegations of religious or other metaphysical means of establishing a form of development extrinsic to the human. Consequently, all modes of bypassing thinking matter in favor of something that exceeds a thinking brain – whether by establishing a limit to thought or by overcoming such a limit – would mean theologizing thought,

history, and matter and its dialectical development.

This is why Ilyenkov juxtaposes Kant’s sublime reality, incomprehensible for thought, to Hegel’s idealism, in which the overhuman mind remains a supposition, but still a human thought is capable of reaching its apex – the apex of the worldly objective mind (absolute reason) – and is able thus to acquire a degree of “higher reality.”

As mentioned above, matter at some stage in its development cannot but generate thought. Hence, instead of the dichotomy of the empirical and the transcendental, or the abstract and the concrete, body and idea, senses and cognition, both components are incorporated by means of a dialectical procedure. It is because of this that in proto-communist social conditions the idea invades the immanence of the living process, rather than being left to the realm of metaphysics. Both “Normal” life and the everyday render the universal and the ideal – be it in material culture or just “banal” communication. So if in Hegel, the general, the absolute, and the idea reside in the human or overhuman spirit, which clashes with the otherness of objective reality and consequently has to dialectically tune it to fit the absolute mind, for Ilyenkov (following Marx here), reality and its diachronic historicity – as well as its further extinction – presuppose that the general is generated by matter, and resides in it; it is reality and its objectivity that produce the idea, thinking, and the dimension of the general.

We now return to the core issue from which we started. To assert the human condition, Ilyenkov needs to start from the complete ruin of human life in the universe. However, such complete evacuation does not terminate the human condition: although the thinking brain can be extinct and perish, when it disappears from one place in an infinite universe it can only appear in another.⁴ At the same time, both such a birth of life and its disappearance are not contingent (as is the case in speculative realism), but are part of the awareness of a thinking mind. Birth and disappearance are inscribed into the mind from the very beginning as the supreme eschatology, so that even the destruction of matter, of thought, and of human history is not accomplished without the awareness and participation of a thinking mind.

Ilyenkov writes, “Dialectical materialism ... resolved the issue of a goal of existence via the category of universal interaction,” which means that Ilyenkov does not endow humanity with a central role in existence. He continues:

Humanity and its thinking capacity is inscribed into the network of universal interaction, it is born inside it, and will

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develop and be some day destroyed there. An image of a “supreme goal” of the existence of humanity is rationally sublated in the understanding of the necessity of mankind’s emergence, development, and decline within and by means of that very common interdependence of all forms of movement of worldly matter.⁵

There are a few important consequences to this statement. 1) Human thought and the history of humanity are just part of a larger cycle of the universal movement of matter. 2) There is no personified subject or personal consciousness; hence all the activities of a thinking organ are something other than just knowledge, cognition, consciousness, or the unconscious. Thinking belongs to the universal dimension just as it is an ordinary part of the everyday, while it is nevertheless not dependent on individual will or consciousness. 3) the universe is conditioned not only by progress, but also by an inevitable decline. And this does not make the role of thinking less human, optimistic, and emancipatory.

Human existence here is not a senseless and fruitless ending, because even its destruction is considered to be a creative act that could become a “prelude” for a new cycle of life somewhere else in universe. In other words, the decline of humanity is an act that could be justified and necessary from the point of view of the universal whirlpool of matter and its own objective rules. Ilyenkov writes at the end of his treatise:

A thought occurs as a historically transient episode in the development of the universe, a “subordinate” product in the development of matter, but an absolutely necessary one – it is a consequence of matter that is simultaneously a condition for infinite matter to exist.⁶

This radical statement quite easily resolves the dilemma brought forward in speculative realism between the ancestrality of the universe and the transitory nature of human history. Human thought cannot die, because in its death it confirms its immortality, because it only remains part of matter, even if ancestrality precedes it or an unimaginable futurity follows it.

The question then becomes the following: Would the creatures in whom the thinking organ might manifest itself again somewhere else in the universe after becoming extinct along with the Earth be human? Couldn’t it be said that it is not important to whom or to what a thinking mind belongs, when human life is over and thought appears in another cosmic

constellation? And if it is exactly thinking that is the supreme realization of universal matter, what makes thought the chief attribute of humanness if it will eventually pass to other creatures after earthly life is extinct? Why does Ilyenkov insist that thinking realizes the human to the extent that, if other creatures were to do the thinking, this thinking capacity would be related to the human nonetheless?

It seems that the term “human” in this case holds a potential for realizing the dimension of the general – bodily and materially via thought and the senses. But still, the question remains of how to claim the human condition in the absence of human life, or of any life at all. The answer that stems from Ilyenkov’s work is this: what humanity aspires for in its beginning and end will always be posited by means of universal matter extended through thinking spirit, regardless of where thinking appears or perishes. Matter will always need the human, or those aspirations that construct the meaning of the human.

A human is not just a natural human being, but the performance of an aspiration for the general and its material implementation. Hence when thought extends from matter in other non-earthly conditions as a form of life elsewhere, it will still remain what the human mind aspired to. This is because human thought is not just knowledge that is accumulated and shared. When the dimension of the general is posited in thought, it happens by means of something other than just intellect or knowledge.

In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates claims that knowledge is not just knowledge, but is first and foremost a virtue. So thought’s striving for enlightenment is not about accumulating knowledge, but is perhaps more about a capacity for self-resignation, for being aware of its own end, for bringing to the human mind a modesty that does not contradict its courage in cognitive quests or political acts. Such an awareness of self-resignation and of a non-self being (as one of the main conditions of the general) is not so much cognitive; it is ethical. What remains human when there are no humans left is precisely virtue: the virtue of the general that thought will always bear as an extension of matter – in other words, as communism inevitably inscribed in matter.

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1

This direction of research is developed in actor-network theory, cyberfeminism, and geophysical theories of the Anthropocene.

2

Evald Ilyenkov, “Космология духа” [Cosmology of the Mind], in *Философия и культура* [Philosophy and Culture] (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Politicheskoy Literaturi, 1991), 415–437.

3

Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude* (London: Continuum, 2009).

4

Ilyenkov, 421.

5

Ibid.

6

Ibid., 435.