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Anagogia in Cosmism and Communism

1. Whence Anagogia

There are three main reasons for revisiting cosmism. Under conditions of harsh localization, when even decolonization and emancipation are pursued through the lexicon of identity politics, and planetary theories turn out to be quasi-indigenous mythologies, cosmism provides a universalist and cosmopolitan dimension. After the failed imaginaries of alter-globalization, cosmism allows us to acquire a perspective that exceeds "the globe." This is the first reason. The second reason is that despite a commitment to radical technical and biophysical experimentation, cosmism never discards the role of the human, but rather preserves its subjectivity, even when such a humanity is imagined to undergo drastic evolutionary or biogenetic transformations. Third reason: cosmism develops an edifice of the commons, which, along with strong ties to Christianity and ecclesiastical eschatology, has many affinities with the communist project. Reconsidering cosmism thus allows us to clarify the relations between all three projects: not only between cosmism and communism, and between cosmism and Christianity, but also between communism and Christianity.

Having evolved from confessional religion, cosmism subsequently detached from it considerably; however, it never developed into a fully functioning political organ of social emancipation or philosophical thought the way communism or Christianity did. Cosmism remained a mixture of theological edification and scientific and technological research, anticipating, at times, a kind of positivist biopolitics. The divergences of cosmism from communist premises and Christian dogmas are very important, but I will start with an affinity they all share.

Nietzsche solved the problem of petty bourgeois, philistine life by promoting the extreme nihilism of the Übermensch, who lives detached from society at the heights of sovereign, lonely power. The Übermensch, like Faust, ascends away from humankind, to contemptuously decry the shallowness of life. Marxism can be seen as the antipode of such a program. In contrast to the ascent of a single individual Übermensch, in Marxism, political ascent and cognitive breakthrough are collective events, programmed socially by and for a collective subject. In this case, "the ascent" – cognitive, social, and existential – becomes possible for the most dispossessed. The Christian premise is similar to the Marxist in that Christ, despite being "God," consented to be like the most belittled, humiliated, and diminished humans. It is in this sense that Nietzsche's Übermensch is an Antichrist. The cognitive

An image from the exhibition “Fantasies of Labas” at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, which displayed a number of works by the Soviet painter Alexander Labas (1900–83).

excellence and the nihilist elevation of Nietzsche's Übermensch, and of Faustian Prometheanism, are different from the anagogical ascent of the saints, of Christ, or of communism, which are accomplished by means of the diminution and dissolution of the self among everymen. (Thus, cosmism is important in its standing between two extreme projects of universalization, Christianity and communism, which compel their adherents to rise above "mere" life, to quote Benjamin.[1])

The idea of ascent – the anagogical direction – is teleological, expedient, purposeful. Yet teleology has long been under suspicion in postwar Western philosophy as a form of idealism and as complicit with discourses of power. We see this in Althusser's treatment of Marx and Hegel; in psychoanalysis, with its critique of the superego and the idea of redemption; and in the post-structuralist assertion that teleology speaks on behalf of coercion and despotism. From Sartre to Lacan, Deleuze to Foucault, the idea of virtue can only be a false pretense – camouflage for just another will to power. Hence, resistance to putative virtue has to be demonic and vicious in order to be effective. Exceeding the viciousness of power by turning to an alternative vice becomes the path of modern emancipation; freedom is realized through estranging the estranged, through alienating the already alienated. This strategy has different names: "suspendedness" and "groundlessness" in Sartre and Nancy; "decomposition" and "dissociation" in Guattari; returning to Plato's cave in Deleuze;[2] welcoming chaos, aleatorics, and the throw of the dice instead of prescribed order in the work of composer Pierre Boulez. All these epistemes were constructed from the critical theory of resistance and liberation that emerged after 1968.

The condition of fallenness is hugely important in these epistemologies. Rather than celebrating the immortal soul's inevitable transcendence of the body, an insistence on fallenness becomes a protest against the phallogocentrism of the Father, Man, Logos, Language, and Discipline. Fallenness becomes associated with the most oppressed and exploited. The fallen, deviant man and his subversive body become the most creative body; its dissensus evolves as the malevolent aestheticization of the fall. The commons becomes the defense by the fallen of their right to fall, to fall apart, to dissociate and claim various modes of falling as resistant solipsism in an otherwise totally controlled and optimized social infrastructure.[3] A metaphor for the resistance of the fallen could be the lumpen proletariat as described by Marx in his "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte."[4] Only let's imagine that Marx, instead of critiquing this social group as miserable bohemian outcasts – who, according to Marx, can be emancipated only if they consciously merge with the proletariat – declared that the lumpen proletariat's social degradation and predilection for indulgence are in fact a manifestation of its capacity for resistance, as long as their voluntary ethical fall is what they take for emancipation.

Promethean theories of acceleration exemplify a tendency that runs counter to the bohemian ethico-aesthetics of the fall. However, alongside affinities with cosmism, theories of acceleration differ in that they proclaim progress and the augmentation and advancement of posthuman intelligence by means of further alienation and dehumanization. Cosmology, in the case of accelerationism, implies the totalization of the outside – hence the parallels between accelerationism and the nihilism of Nietzsche and Faustianism. For Russian cosmism, by contrast, the exemplary figures are Christ and Cordelia, who work for devotion and against alienation. For cosmism, the social ideal is a de-alienated universe that can be a "home" – a form of common inhabitance (вселять/вселенная) – rather than an infinitely expanding void conquered by advanced intelligence. The cosmos of Russian cosmism is finite, not infinite. For postwar Western thought, redemption is unimaginable under conditions of alienated labor. For cosmism, kinship as a radical form of de-alienation is essential for universalism; it evolves as the purposefulness of common labor in achieving the commons globally and transglobally. In communism, de-alienation is realized through the eradication of the division of labor and private property. In both cases – cosmism and communism – the goal is not merely the expansion of intellect or of universal technological excellence. Rather, the goal is overall communization with as much de-alienation as possible; technology is merely the means for this.

2. Cosmism between Communism and Christianity

Thus, for cosmism and communism, emancipation is a practice of ascent, or anagogia – a project of virtue. Instead of *resistance to evil*, there is a fervent *assertion of virtue*. This does not mean that such assertions always go smoothly. It just means that a project in which virtue and de-alienation might be accomplished is logically and pragmatically possible. According to this logic, the distribution of evil and virtue does not take place primarily as a struggle between two forces, one good and the other evil. Instead, evil simply does not exist. Within such

Alexander Labas, *Cosmos,* date unknown.

logic (which is part and parcel of the Gospel and of classical patristics), evil can be viable only if one sees and acknowledges it as existent. Evil has no ontology. It is no counterpart of virtue. Adam's fall exists only within his own sin, as the consequence of a free choice to fall, after freedom was given to him in order to be similar to God. So, there is only one force, virtue, and what is not virtue is simply its lack or absence. Resisting evil as evil, then, balances or confirms it rather than eradicating it.

As we have remarked, cosmism's main alignments are Christian theology and communism. While cosmism's overlappings with the latter are regarded as progressive, its overlappings with the former are usually omitted when integrating the cosmist legacy into critical thought. It's parallels with Christianity, however, are essential, not only in mapping cosmism's genealogy, but also in tracing the important ways that it deviates from Christianity. Conceptually and onto-ethically, cosmism's deviations from Christianity correlate with its deviations from communism. Let's see how.

The cosmist obsession with resurrection is animated by cosmism's goal of achieving a supreme level of consciousness. This is attained when even sinners are reborn into a new life, *nuova vita* – the heavenly kingdom, the universe as virtue. By the time of Christ's Second Coming, liberation from sin enables even sinners to enter a paradisial universe. However, the concern is not merely the resurrection of one's life, but *the quality of virtue* of the resurrected commons. The necessary preparations for cosmological eternity are not merely biotechnical and social, but also ethical and theurgical, in terms of facilitating Christ's labor of resurrection, and readying humankind and the universe for His coming. The goal of cosmism, as Fedorov puts it, is for all humans to commitment to Christ's task of reclaiming paradise for a fallen humankind, i.e., to achieve the common overall anagogia – the uplifting of all to the condition of Adam and Eve's reclaimed virtuousness. The afterlife, which previously was something that could only be reached by means of death, becomes a mundane, organized co-production with God. Immortality is not merely a biotechnical achievement, but the acquisition of sinlessness in the reunion of body and mind, as predicted by the Second Coming.[5]

However, there is something problematic here from the point of view of Christian theology.

Cosmism preserves the authority of God, but it attempts to effectuate God's own tasks. It thus neglects the sermons regarding the *expectation* of God's grace. Fedorov upholds the role of God, but announces that the entirety of humanity is capable of divinity in advance, *in situ* – capable of launching a project of global engineering and universal liturgy on behalf of God's will.

In the Christian sermons, however, this is impossible, since grace (благодать/*blagodat'*) is acquired not via Promethean boldness, but via humble resignation. No matter how righteous and hardworking the immortality-worker has been, when she stands before God, the remission of her sins depends not on how much or how well she has built, but on the extent to which her heart is contrite (сокрушенное сердце/*sokrushennoe serdze*). That is, the atonement of sins doesn't depend on human will, labor, or the accumulation of virtuous deeds, but only on God's judgment and mercy, which require from humans a constant awareness of our sinfulness and the need to repent. This work of repenting and humbleness before God is not discreet and consistent; it is rather a constant struggle against our inborn fallenness. Redemption requires incessant confession, the perpetual work of self-transformation (or "metanoia"), and communion. In this regime, humanity cannot make a pact with God to co-produce or co-organize paradise as a shared project. Fedorov mostly avoids these subtle existential components of the traditional liturgy, appealing instead to a universal liturgy understood as a kind of total constructivist work of moral edification and biotechnological regulation. Failure has no place in his cosmism.

For Christians, by contrast, anagogia is in the awareness of failures – in the determination to take another step despite the utmost failure that is human fallenness. The uplift of anagogia is impossible without an awareness of failures made during the labor of ascending. This constant self-resignation, indispensable for anagogia, is embodied by a statement from the Gospel of Matthew (5:3): "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." Anthony of Sourozh, a writer and Metropolitan bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain, interprets this statement as indicating a desperate inability to do anything without God's blessing and mercy, since whatever is done can be ascribed only to God's generosity. One is blessed for being poor in spirit, because one always admits that one can only lack the Holy Spirit, can only be poor in it. From this point of view, Fedorov's resurrection and total liturgy are problematic because, until Christ's Second Coming, there will always be a lack of spirit and a lack of divine love. How, then, could Christians, who cannot but lack spirit and love, be capable of accomplishing Fedorov's Christological resurrection?

In the writing of Andrei Platonov (such as his novels *Chevengur* and *The Foundation Pit*, or his

novella *Soul*), the real communists are precisely those who are poor in communism – those who feel themselves not entirely and sufficiently communist. Communist humbleness before history and Christian humbleness before God both stand in contrast to cosmism's non-dialectical confidence, which is devoid of ruptures and paradoxes. While cosmism initially posits a theurgical goal – i.e., the conquest of sin and the synergetic assimilation of humans with Christ – it subsequently concentrates mainly on biophysical and biotechnical optimization, demonstrating overt hostility to philosophy. Philosophy is nothing but pagan sophistry for Fedorov, while for Bogdanov it is merely a symptom of an insufficient understanding of scientific organization. Cosmism also rejects those aspects of theological thinking tainted by doubt, the unknown, or the evental, even as its scientific projections cannot fully rid themselves of religious poetics. The theological horizon of Christianity is neglected, while philosophy is discarded in favor of total planning. Cosmism thus attempts to pursue the same goals as Christianity, communism, and philosophy – insofar as they aspire to the truthfulness of being and the realization of a virtuous commons – but ignores the inevitable conceptual and practical contradictions encountered on the path to achieving virtue.

What Christianity, communism, and philosophy have in common, and what cosmism lacks, is an eschatology conditioned by the event. In Christianity, communism, and philosophy, *nuova vita* is not programmed, planned, or organized; it *erupts* through an irreversible event. While philosophy and theology may subsequently confirm "the truthful" of the event, they do not prescribe or design it in advance. For Christianity, examples of such radical eschatological events are the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Second Coming. For communism, the central event is social revolution.

Eventality is constructed dialectically, revealing constant doubts, paradoxes, and contradictions. But it can also turn into a positivist speculative design, as happens often in contemporary techno-futurisms. While cosmism is more than just mechanistic technological planning, it does not admit of any rupture between being and consciousness – the very thing that organizes and constructs philosophical dialectics.

Lenin and many other Soviet Marxists rejected Bogdanov's positivism; while they agreed with Bogdanov that natural science has a hugely important function, it could not, they insisted, supersede philosophy. The Marxist notion that being is independent from and precedes consciousness presupposed a certain philosophical gnoseology, or metaphysics of knowledge. Things and acts are not objective; they are biased by Hegel's *Andersein* (other-determined, non-self being). As the Soviet Marxist philosopher Evald Ilyenkov asserted, referencing Lenin's critique of Bogdanov and empiricism: "Hydrogen and electrons are not identical to the gnoseological issues of conceptualizing hydrogen and electrons."[6]

Mere data cannot be cognized without gnoseological means of generalization – and generalization always entails contradiction. Not confined to dealing with data provided by the natural sciences, philosophical generalization involves the dialectical study of the objective material world from various, often contradictory, angles.[7] From this point of view, contradictions between the abstract and the concrete cannot be resolved via techno-naturalist isomorphisms that are derived from biological or physical laws and then applied to social life (as in Bogdanov's "tektology," a universal science of organization).[8] As Ilyenkov writes: "Without the dialectical coalescing of the relative and the absolute, one cannot develop generalized knowledge, and hence objectiveness. Objective truth cannot, then, be distinguished from a subjective picture."[9]

This argument is about the inability of scientific data to stand for objective truth. Ilyenkov's argument is that pure experience is not objective, but rather subjective. As he insists, the empiricist gnoseology of Bogdanov's tektology is founded on subjective psychic experience; the data from this subjective experience is merely extrapolated to other realms, such as the economic and the social. Thus consciousness for Bogdanov remains a psychic, sensory phenomenon. Philosophy, on the other hand, deals with things that are not confined to perceived facts. What Bogdanov takes for granted, Ilyenkov and Lenin vigorously doubt: namely, that social being and social consciousness are identical and simultaneous. Meanwhile, independence of being from consciousness becomes the kernel not only of philosophical ontognoseology, but of social and political practice as well. This gives rise to the illusory hope of solving ideological ruptures by means of physical laws, that is, by means of applying the principle of an equilibrium of energies to societal contexts.[10]

In other words, communist, Christian, and philosophical approaches to life and its organization cannot follow a straightforward, coherently organized, transparently planned path. Anagogia cannot be guaranteed. Technology cannot and will not ever emulate consciousness, neither algorithmically nor

biophysically.

When it comes to discussions of resurrection or eternal life through artificial intelligence, a common argument is that, while a person's body can be resurrected, or their intelligence and mental capacities reconstituted, it is impossible to algorithmically reconstruct the complexity and intentionality of consciousness. This is because, goes the argument, consciousness is not mere intelligence; it is the body acting with the awareness of a huge complexity of phenomena surrounding it, making choices that are mostly nonrandom. As Fedorov would say, consciousness is the "organ of acting supra-morally."[11]

In cosmism, however, the problem of resurrecting the unique immateriality of consciousness was not considered a problem at all. Corporeal resurrection, it was assumed, would automatically entail the return of consciousness to the body. In his theory of resurrection, the Russian theologian and philosopher Pavel Florensky relied on the notion of "sphragistics" developed by the fourth-century saint Gregory Nyssen.[12] According to sphragistics, all the atoms in one's body bear the seal of one's soul and consciousness. Thus, at the time of resurrection, the elements of our bodies – even when dispersed – can be recognized and collected by means of this unique seal. The mental and spiritual imprint of a person remains inherent in the material atoms and particles of their body. Similarly, Fedorov claimed that when a body is resurrected, consciousness automatically joins it.

Ilyenkov's Marxist response to this idea would be to insist that consciousness is not a psychic or sensory category. While consciousness is certainly embodied, its construction is chiefly formed by the objective, external sociality of a world, which is independent of consciousness. The idea of objective reality forming consciousness is the kernel of materialist dialectics. This means that it would be impossible to resurrect a given individual consciousness, since this individual consciousness is not merely the psychic life of a person, but the whole complexity of its "other-determined, non-self being" (*Andersein*), engaged and realized in concrete historical conditions. How can one resurrect a consciousness when the external "everything" that constructed it is forever lost? From this perspective, resurrection can only ever be biophysical. Without consciousness, which is social and historical by definition, any resurrected being would be a mere zombie or bio-robot. Ilyenkov's argument is that mind and consciousness do not reside in the brain; rather, they derive from social relations, activity, and labor.

3. Immortality Despite Mortality

What if we already have access to immortality? What if we are already immortal?

To a considerable extent, cosmism projects immortality as the physical maintenance of longevity. The struggle against death, and for physical longevity, is necessary and important. However, it would be a logical mistake to deny that immortality can exist despite mortality. The reason is simple. As long as immortality – both as physical eternity and divine grace – has not yet been achieved, it would be cruel to deprive humankind of the ethical persistence it attains by claiming immortality within and despite mortality.

It is precisely this condition that gives birth to philosophy. To philosophize is to learn how to die, as Socrates defines it for his disciples in Plato's *Phaedo*. But it is just such a philosophical readiness for mortality that, paradoxically, maintains the existence of a conceptual, logical, ideational immortality. For a philosopher, learning to die means loving life; it means having the capacity to assert life without and beyond life. It is the philosophical ethics of the acceptance of death that establishes such ideational immortality.

In a reversal of this model, a number of sci-fi films and novels portray immortal beings who voluntarily opt for mortality. In Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), a boy, who is an immortal cyborg, sacrifices his immortality in order to once again meet his deceased foster mother. Immortal cyborgs often choose to become mortal for the sake of their love for humans. This becoming-mortal of the immortal establishes a new kind of ideational supra-immortality.

In fact, Christ played the role of such an immortal cyborg: he chose to die as a mortal for the sake of his love for each and every mortal human being – thus immortalizing those mortals through his sacrificial act. In other words, Christ's act becomes immortal within and despite its transitoriness and its acquiescence to death.

(Interestingly, saints, who are seldom mentioned in cosmist texts, are in fact those exceptional humans who can enter the heavenly kingdom – who can attain immortality – despite being mortal; that is, they can be granted sainthood while they are alive and still very much residing on earth.)

The idea of infinity despite and within finitude was developed by Evald Ilyenkov in his fascinating essay "Cosmology of the Mind" (1950s). His point of departure is the assumption that despite all our advanced technology, the

solar system (and humankind along with it) will sooner or later perish. And the thinking mind, as the principle attribute of matter in that system, will perish as well. According to Ilyenkov, in the first stage of its decline, the solar system will cool; this will be followed by a thermal explosion that will turn everything into hot steam and gas. But when the solar system begins to fade away, it is the thinking human mind that will foster this process of decline, voluntarily striving towards an explosive thermal death. The destruction of matter implies a thinking mind that is aware of inevitable collapse. By striving for this explosion and thereby accelerating the end of life, the thinking mind facilitates the return of matter to its "primary juvenile" state, so that new life can emerge again. The emergence of this new life in turn entails the reappearance of the thinking mind, since matter cannot but grow into mind. And since mind can only be human, humankind will be reborn – over and over again. In this "phantasmagorical" text, Ilyenkov wants to prove that even the collapse of the universe is not merely a natural contingency of matter, but happens only through the participation and initiation of human consciousness.[13]

For Ilyenkov, the complete destruction of matter is impossible in this scenario because the explosion releases even more energy than is consumed in the destruction of the existing universe. While the thinking mind is destroyed, it carries out this voluntary self-sacrifice so that matter can develop again in some other part of the universe. Here, the logic of eternity goes as follows: if mind is the principle attribute of matter, and matter cannot exist without mind, then any matter will inevitably develop into mind. And since mind is necessarily *human* mind, humankind will always be reborn in other galaxies.[14]

By this logic, death is inevitable, but so is the impossibility of death. Such an anti-egoist awareness of one's eventual eclipse by new life is, for Ilyenkov, confirmation of the materialist-dialectical premise that objective matter and reality prevail over consciousness, be it individual or collective. But this does not imply any critique or dismissal of a correlation between mind and matter, as is the case with speculative realism. On the contrary: a humble and generous awareness of the perishability of human life and thought – an acceptance of the objective and supreme role of universal matter – only confirms the maturity of mind and its necessity for matter.

Thus, the dialectical tragedy of Being is that the human mind is aware of two seemingly contradictory conditions: 1) the human mind – and therefore humanity – is an extension of infinite matter; and 2) mind and humankind are matter's main necessity.

To achieve the merging of mind and matter, mind (consciousness) has to be aware that it is never an isolated self, that it is always an *other-determined non-self*, destined to generalize itself in the direction of objective reality. This aspiration towards *non-self being* allows one to humbly accept one's non-being – an act that paradoxically asserts one's logical immortality. As Socrates teaches in *Phaedo*, it is indifference to death that allows a philosopher to grasp what eternity is.

In fact, those who would be resurrected in the Second Coming would not be our earthly "we" or "me." They would be those universal selves who, by means of anagogia, had reached their metanoic non-selves in *nuova vita*.

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1
Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in W. Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 277–300.)

2
In his *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze famously imagines philosophy not as an exit from the cave, but as eternal nomadic rumination within its labyrinths.

3
André Lepecki dedicates a book to such a solipsistic derangement: *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (London: Routledge, 2006).

4
Available at marxists.org https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/18th-Brumaire.pdf.

5
Nikolai Fedorov, "From the First Volume of *The Philosophy of Common Task*," in N. Fedorov, *Works* (in Russian) (Moscow: Misl, 1982), 53–442.

6
Evald Ilyenkov, *Leninskaya Dialektica i metaphizika pozitivizma* (Lenin's dialectics and the metaphysics of positivism) (Moscow: Mir Philosophii, 2015), 102. Lenin's critique can be found in chapter 6 ("Empirio-Criticism and Historical Materialism") of his book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, available at marxists.org https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/.

7
Ilyenkov, *Leninskaya Dialektica*, 109.

8
Alexander Bogdanov, *Tektology, Book 1,* trans. A. Kartashov, V. Kelle, and P. Bystrov (Hull: Centre for Systems Studies Press, 1996).

9
Ilyenkov, *Leninskaya Dialektica,* 118.

10
Ibid., 118–19. According to Ilyenkov, social relations, which are rife with complexities and contradictions, cannot be managed or balanced this way.

11
Fedorov, "Supramoralism ili Vseobshi Sintez" (Supramoralism, or the overall synthesis), in *Works*, 473–507.

12
Pavel Florensky, "Organoproekzia" (The projection of organs), in *Russkiy Kosmizm*, eds. S. Semenova and A. Gacheva (Moscow: Pedagogika Press), 149–62.

13
For an English translation of this essay – one that uses the term "spirit" instead of "mind" – see Evald Ilyenkov, "Cosmology of the Spirit," trans. Giuliano Vivaldi, *Stasis* 5, no. 2 (2017).

14
As Ilyenkov writes in the essay: "In this hypothesis of perishability, death appears not as a senseless and fruitless end, but as an act that in its essence is a creative end – a prelude to a new cycle of life for the Universe."