

## HUMANITY AND THE DISRUPTION OF THE COSMOS: HOW BERDYAEV FORESAW OUR RELIANCE ON MACHINES

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**ABSTRACT:** In his final work, *the Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar* (1952), Nikolai Berdyaev categorized five historical periods on the relationship between humanity and nature. This meta-historical framework was articulated due to his concern about an obstructive imbalance between spirituality, materialism, and modern industrial technology. This essay overviews the framework and considers it with relation to eras subsequent his passing. It finds that Berdyaev’s projection was not only theoretically plausible, but turned out to be remarkably accurate in predicting the transition from a technical industrial society to one based around autonomous spheres of operation including the internet and artificial intelligence. The final stage of the fourth period, our current era, was predicted by Berdyaev to be marked by a new form of global subjugation – in the merging of technology with the state and our enslavement to our own discoveries. Attention is also given to a future, eschatological fifth period in which Berdyaev believed a spiritual revolution would accompany widespread dissolution of state power and the emancipation of labor.

**KEYWORDS:** Religion; Atheism; Artificial Intelligence; Ethics; Technology

### INTRODUCTION

“It is a horrible fact in human life, that good is realized by means of evil, truth by means of falsehood, beauty by means of ugliness, freedom by means of violence” (Berdyaev 1952, 94). The human being is a contradictory subject – encompassing of both freedom and evil, of love and hatred, argued Nikolai Berdyaev. Berdyaev was born in the Russian empire (1874), and was part of the original Slavophil intellectual movement. He made noteworthy contributions to philosophy –

especially to personalist and existentialist types. Politically, he rejected Bolshevism, the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as Communism and capitalism. At the height of the second Russian Revolution, he was among dozens of other intellectuals that were exiled by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Gaining passage into Europe by way of the famous “philosopher’s ship,” Berdyaev spent the remainder of his life in France. He was among the few 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian philosophers that ended up engaging with subjects in both East and West, and in the latter years of his life, he engaged with notable French and British intellectuals in a time that was marked by the emergence of existentialism in philosophical thought.

Berdyaev’s dealings with philosophy were diverse – he engaged with thinkers ranging from Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Camus, to Jacob Boehme and E.T.A Hoffmann, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Honore´ de Balzac, among others. Berdyaev described himself as a philosopher of personalism and creativity – personality was arguably the foremost component of his thought. Personality for Berdyaev is not equatable to individualism as each personality is spiritual, unique, and outside the realm of objectivity (Berdyaev 1955). Personality is not a natural phenomenon but a spiritual one and is greatly subjective. Through exercising personality, one can pursue the highest truth, which Berdyaev assumed to belong to the spiritual realm rather than to the realm of Caesar (the realm of objectivity). There are significant parallels between Berdyaev and Dostoevsky. The similarities between the two are most evident in their engagement with the concepts of freedom, evil, and God (Kantor 2015). Both viewed freedom to be tragic in nature, and believed the world is filled contradictions and paradoxes. Berdyaev projected that a later period of history would feature a spiritual awakening that would see the divine spiritual characteristic of human beings come to fruition during a spiritual victory over age-old governmental institutions and concentrated forms of coercive social organization. He referred to the latter as belonging to the Realm of Caesar.

This projection was put forward in his last book, *the Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar* (1952) as the fifth of five total periods of the history of human beings’ relationship to the cosmos. Berdyaev believed that what had been referred to as “being” by existentialist philosophers of his epoch is not the “final depth of value,” and that a future spiritual transformation would enable human beings to experience a new spiritual life (Berdyaev 1952, 18). Along the way,

humans would get enslaved to and dominated by technology in the second to last period (our current era). Due to the heterogeneity of his ideas and the number of different thinkers and philosophers Berdyaev engaged with, a variety of different books and scholarly articles have been published on his contributions to philosophy and history in the half century since his passing. These include: accounts of Berdyaev's decision making throughout pivotal periods of early twentieth century history (Kiseleva 2016), on his views on the spiritual causes of the 1917 Russian revolution (Porus 2017), his contributions to our understanding of creativity (Zhukova 2016), to philosophy and existentialism (Herberg 1957; Wright 1962), to understandings of nihilism (Vishnyakova 2011), to existential conceptions of time (Gordon 2012), to the relationship between tragedy and God (Hartshorne 1957), to our understanding of eschatology (Calian 1965), to perceptions of reality and materialism (Dye 1979), to gnosticism (Bourke 1936), to love and marriage (Slesinski 1986), social unity (Harold 2010), artistic representations (Tarasov 2011), Christian existentialism (Lowrie 1965), orthodox theology (Valliere 2000), freedom (McLachlan 1992), among numerous other topics including Russian Cosmism (Young 2012).

Yet to date, one of Berdyaev's most interesting theorizations remains unaddressed. In the final years before his passing (the late 1940s), Berdyaev observed that humanity was set to experience a crisis of a new totality, a crisis that had hitherto never been seen. The crisis was believed to be based on the onset of a profound lack of balance between spirituality with relation to political organization and modern technology (Berdyaev 1952, 48). It would emerge in the latter half of the twentieth and in the specific fourth historical period as classified in his final book. In this understudied work, Berdyaev put forward five historical periods that illustrate past and future relationships that human beings have to nature and the cosmos:

Period one) our submersion to cosmic life in which human life depended on the natural world – a time when personality was not fully developed and humans did not fully conquer nature; Period two) humans became freed from cosmic forces, from spirits and demons attributed to nature – the emergence of elementary forms of economics and serfdom; Period three) humans carried out mechanization over nature through scientific and technical control – the development of industry, capitalism, a new necessity of selling one's labor for

wages; Period four) an era marked by the disruption of cosmic order, the dissolution of organic forms of human organization and the development of various autonomous spheres – where one of them claims totalitarian recognition. An era marked by a terribly augmented power that humans have over nature and their enslavement to their own discoveries; Period five) an eschatological revolution, the decline of the realm of Caesar, the dissolution of state power, labor emancipation, spiritual transmutation (Berdyayev 1952, 47).

The first three periods precede the twentieth century, whereas the fourth period begins with the era of WWII and spans into the twenty first century – a time which Berdyayev believed would feature the rise of an all-powerful state that would stake a total claim of objectivity over all of social and natural phenomena. This was not only the final stage of realm of Caesar, but also the last possible stage of this realm. Berdyayev describes this meta-historical trajectory succinctly:

where once man feared the demons of nature and Christ freed him from demonolatry, now man is in terror before the world-wide mechanization of nature. The power of technics is the final metamorphosis of the realm of Caesar. (Berdyayev 1952, 48).

Throughout this paper, the historical periods will be drawn on and investigated in chronological order with relation to historical events and processes. The periods will also be explained with supplementary reference to Berdyayev's other works including *Russian Cosmism* as well as Heidegger's framework on the essence of technology. The fifth period will particularly be investigated with specific reference to spiritual transformation and the influences that likely went into his conceptualization of this period. To the best of my knowledge, the following analysis will be the first to cover Berdyayev's (1952) conceptualization of historical periods. At the time of writing this essay, in the English language, there is no direct assessment of this book (cited 55 times on Google Scholar), while in the Russian language, the book is cited 92 times on Google Scholar (.RU), and there also is no direct assessment of the book and its five periods.

#### CONTEXTUALIZING THE FIVE PERIODS

The book under attention elucidates Berdyayev's ideas about human history, nature, and spirituality in a much bolder fashion than any of his other works. It

was translated into English and published in 1952 just several years after his passing. Within this set of ideas that were written in a decisive time of history, five meta-historical periods were categorized. While Berdyaev's previous works such as the *Russian Idea* (1927; 1947), were read widely, they were limited to a specific regional basis and preceded the occurrence of crucial events such as World War II and the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan. The immensely transformative nature of these latter events led to major changes and realizations on how Berdyaev believed humanity interacted with nature. In writing the work, *the Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, Berdyaev offered projections that were not limited to his contemporary academic surroundings, e.g., existentialist philosophy, but touched on grandiose themes. Berdyaev was part of what are referred to as Russian Slavophiles - intellectuals of the 19th century that emphasized the Orthodox identity of ethnic Russian Slavs who could fulfil their religious practices through local level organizations and communities. The Russian term *sobornost* (which was a form of public, verbal confession in which individuals profess their sins), was frequently drawn on by Berdyaev to describe how Orthodoxy could successfully manifest on a local level in Russia. Hence, although Berdyaev's notion of spirituality is much more communal than individual, he spent a great deal of his career theorizing about personality and creativity. There is also significant variance between different Slavophiles and their views on Orthodoxy. Berdyaev saw the empirical world as mundane and inauthentic which contrasts to someone like Bulgakov who viewed the world as being a holy grail that was endowed by Christ (Young 2012, 134).

The five periods are best thought of as a meta-historical framework. They specifically were laid out in the chapter titled, "Man and the Cosmos – Technics" then developed in subsequent areas of the book. The main themes under attention in these periods are two realms that Berdyaev categorizes – those of spirit (subjectivity) and of Caesar (objectivity and authority). The length of some of the historical periods (for example, period one) may appear to be elongated as Berdyaev places emphasis on particular ruptures that changed how spirituality and objectivity were conceived at different points in time. Such ruptures are historically rare, finite, and unique. They are assumed to change the trajectory of human affairs. These phases are "typological and not chronological, although the passage of time plays a certain part" (Berdyaev 1952, 47). Moreover, these periods must be interpreted with knowledge of one of Berdyaev's key assumptions

about human nature – in that the human being is “at once a natural, a social, and a spiritual being” (Berdyaeu 1952, 57). Hence, at varying points throughout history, we were succumbed and have even been enslaved to different tiers of being.

The different periods classified by Berdyaeu center around a dichotomy of two realms – the realm of spirit and the realm of objectivity. The latter is interchangeably referred to as the realm of Caesar and is equivalent to latent (and historically variant) large scale forms of political organization such as empires or states. The two realms feature the intersection of the aforementioned characteristics in Berdyaeu’s assumption of what constitutes the human being and human nature. In the future, Berdyaeu foresaw that the Realm of Caesar would dissipate as human beings would move into a more harmonious form of existence that would be spiritual in essence. Freedom would come from within (subjective practices) and not from without (state institutions and social objectification). To get to this point however, wide spread adversities were predicted to be experienced human beings in an era that would be dominated by technology.

Previous insights into technology and its impact on human beings, especially in terms of its enslaving characteristics, have been identified by a variety of thinkers. In 1819, Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi took a position against laissez-faire economics and argued that technological development exacerbated the adverse impacts on society that market based systems could have (Israel 2019, 373). Russian Cosmists ranging from Vasily Karazin to Nikolai Fedorov, also held deeply intriguing views on technology and its relationship to the human condition but believed that technology could be positively channeled and enable humans to achieve scientific immortalism and evolve to a new form of humanity (Young 2012). In contrast, Heidegger, a philosopher that Berdyaeu heavily studied and was influenced by, put forward a wide-reaching argument on technology in which he conceptualized it as an ontological condition that humans must overcome. Technology arose with industrialized society and was integral to the historical emergence of such a society. The threat posed to humans by technology was not a direct one but constitutes an ontological condition that we can be saved from (Dreyfus 1997, 42). As subsequent sections of this paper will demonstrate, it is likely that Heidegger’s views on technology had greater influence on Berdyaeu’s categorization of the fifth and final historical period in his framework when

compared to Russian Cosmism as well as other technological perspectives.

We now turn to the first period of Berdyaev's framework and begin our assessment in a time when human beings were very much entangled in the natural world and lacked social and spiritual development.

#### *Period one*

We begin at an early stage of history in which human beings were "bound to Mother-earth" (Berdyaev 1952, 48). This first stage is temporally vast as it ranges from early hunter gatherer societies, orders based around primitive agriculture, to the height of the Roman empire. In this period, humans were submerged into natural and organic surroundings including having established deeply rooted relationships with vegetation, animal life, and seasonal patterns. Humans were within cosmic life and the order of the cosmos, argued Berdyaev. They did not yet have any notable wide reaching control over nature and its forces. Spiritually, before the historical emergence of Jesus Christ and Christianity, populations across the world were largely paganistic or polytheistic. They attributed causality to nature and natural occurrences while simultaneously nature determined their conceptualization of group-based spiritual existence. Berdyaev describes this period as being marked by the determination of natural forces over spiritual beliefs. In the first period, personalism was unknown to the pre-Christian world (Berdyaev 1952, 60). Although though there was greater harmony between humans and their natural surroundings during the first period than in any subsequent period, paganistic worldviews were prevalent and personality had yet to develop.

Berdyaev describes such world views as being demonstrative of a primitive level of spiritual development. In this respect, human life was adversely confined to cosmic (natural) forces. These forces were rationalized into various cultural myths – including mythological concepts such as imaginary creatures, gods that were representative of countless natural forces and phenomena (hurricanes, storms, earthquakes, lunar eclipses), and even of demonaltry. These widespread paganistic patterns are noted by Berdyaev to have been nearly universal. The paganistic trend however, was broken with the historical emergence of Jesus Christ and the rise of Christianity. During the beginning stages of the height of the Roman Empire, Christianity ended up overturning thousands of years of demonaltry. Christ's message, argues Berdyaev, led to the emergence of a new

era marked by a dualism that had never before been articulated. In detail, Christ asserted a dualism between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar – a dualism that Berdyaev described as representing spirit and subjectivity (God) on one hand and objectivity (Caesar) on the other. This separation was immensely significant as it enabled personality to develop on a spiritual plane without necessary attachment to natural forces. This profound discursive rupture led human beings into a new period in which nature no longer determined their spiritual activity and existence.

While human beings made immense spiritual strides as a result of a radical shift in thought, they did not manage to deal with an impending problem of authority. By the ending point of the first historical era, the role of authority turned out to be highly adverse as authority prevented Christ's message from diffusing properly. This was due to what Berdyaev described as authoritative and socially objectified forces. Such forces are endemic to the human condition. In the depths of consciousness, the human being is predisposed for both goodness and evil (Berdyaev 1926). Along these lines, Berdyaev argued that the origin of authority is connected with the existence of evil (Berdyaev 1952, 83). Once Christ's message met authority, it led to his crucifixion and objectification. This is a reoccurring theme in Berdyaev's thought, specifically in his depictions of the perpetual adverse impact that authority has had on humanity. Throughout history, when human beings attempted to utilize organized systems of authority to deal with both revolutionary messages or manifestations of evil, authority would reproduce and extend evil (Berdyaev 1952, 83). While such statements do indeed appear to be anarchistic, it is important to point out that Berdyaev was not an anarchist - he noted that, "it may be said that my view-point is too much under the influence of the anarchist myth, but this is not the case. The idea of a utopia, happy and stateless, is quite foreign to me" (Berdyaev 1952, 72).

Furthermore, the dualism of objective and spiritual realms that emerged with Jesus Christ enabled human beings to become free from group-based enslavement to cosmic forces and mythical constructions that were previously attributed to nature throughout heterogeneous paganistic societies. The notion of Christ being a savior of mankind for Berdyaev was highly personalistic and spiritual (Berdyaev 1938). In this regard, Christ opened up the realm of spirituality through attributing spirituality to a personal level on one hand, and



through disaggregating it from nature on the other. Even though this disaggregation was revolutionary, it was objectified and resulted in Christ's message being used to promote authority in the realm of Caesar. This brings us to another key assumption held by Berdyaev – in that the freedom of human personality “cannot be given by society, and by its source and nature it cannot depend upon society – it belongs to man himself, as a spiritual being” (Berdyaev 1952, 59). This is particularly why Berdyaev rejected communism, capitalism, democracy, and any framework associated with large-scale centralized governance due to their incompatibility with spirituality – the kernel of true freedom. He also rejected organized religion such as the Catholic or Orthodox Churches due to their tendency to objectify religion in the realm of Caesar.

*Period two*

The second period spans from the time the diffusion of objectified Christianity occurred (at the height of the Roman empire) to the end of the Middle Ages (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries). Early on, Christianity was turned into an objectified authoritative structure and even though this helped foster a possibility for a “supreme spiritual revolution” (Berdyaev 1952, 60) in comparison to the status quo of paganism found in the first period, this revolution did not actually ever arise due to objectification and the realm of Caesar. Christianity provided human beings with a theoretical possibility to spiritually free themselves from natural forces and the limitless power of society and the state. As such, Berdyaev's second historical period begins with the Roman-led crucifixion of Christ, and the subsequent objectification of his message. Christ's message did not succeed because it was objectified and merged into a complimentary configuration with the Roman state.

Attention has to be given to this specific conceptualization of early Christian history as Berdyaev's noted account is not entirely unique. This account of Christianity is one that is non-traditional, and is similar to that of Leo Tolstoy and Dostoevsky – both figures that rejected the traditional Orthodox Church. Berdyaev argued that conceptualizing the relation human beings have to God through obedience and causal effects actually led the human race to succumb to social processes of submission, servitude, and to herd mentality. Monism whether it be religious or anti-religious, always lends itself towards tyranny (Berdyaev 1952, 69). Berdyaev argues that the Apostle, Paul, contributed to the

objectification of this religion greatly by seeking to place Christianity into universal history. Paul had grave fears that Christianity could turn into an “anarchistic, revolutionary sect” (Berdyaeu 1952, 70). Berdyaeu explains that this ended up resulting in the Church not only failing to sanction the authority of Caesar, but it simultaneously equated it with authority derived from God. Thus, all subsequent “Christian” states and empires were purely symbolic – they actually compromised the standing and original message behind Christianity (Berdyaeu 1952, 71).

To summarize this interesting logic, Berdyaeu posits that spirit is equivalent to true freedom, but ideas of spirit got objectified throughout the second period of history and into the subsequent periods in favor and confirmation of governmental authority (Berdyaeu 1952, 71). Organized religion, argued Berdyaeu, tends to objectify itself in social structures, thus rendering it into an anti-personalist standing (Berdyaeu 1938). Structures of this sort have historically merged themselves into courtesy with empires, kingdoms, and most recently in states. Similarly, for Tolstoy, the Roman-led persecution and crucifixion of Christ symbolized the totalitarian character of the objective world. Tolstoy noted that, “Christ's whole teaching is a pointing out of the way of emancipation from the power of the world” (Tolstoy 1968, 268).

This brings us to a crucial tendency that Berdyaeu observed throughout the second period and even beyond into the third and fourth periods. When seeking social change, human beings have an inclination to set up a continuation of the realm of Caesar (Berdyaeu 1952, 65). This is why Berdyaeu frequently noted that all political revolutions are tragic. In the second period, the realm of Caesar continued to strengthen. Berdyaeu refers to this as “the law of Caesar’s realm” - a trend that manifests itself through every revolution that has occurred through chronological history. This entails that the French, British, American, and Russian revolutions brought about anti-personalist and spiritually vitiated outcomes. Berdyaeu argues the basis of materialism can never be able to solve the problem of freedom (as true freedom is inherently subjective and spiritual). This is a tragic scenario for Berdyaeu as revolution in social struggles and the aim for a new society gets determined not by spirituality, but by the means used and the degree of violence employed (Berdyaeu 1952, 64). Berdyaeu brings up the example of Gandhi and argues that, “Gandhi was of course more revolutionary

than the communists, in the spiritual sense of the word, and just because of this spiritual revolution he was killed” (Berdyaeu 1952, 64).

The second period was not only marked by the institutionalization of revolutionary ideas and messages put forward by Christ, but gradually, elementary forms of economics and serfdom also arose. These trends became especially prevalent after the step-wise collapse of the Roman Empire. Serfdom grew to be salient by the Middle Ages, and was a great compliment to empire-led mercantilist profit seeking. The upkeep of empires, kingdoms and city states was reliant on agricultural productivity carried out by serfs and peasants who were subordinate to politically dominant religious authority that was dictated to them through monarchical theology. Socio-political configurations of this sort were prevalent to varying extent across different areas of the world. Importantly, during the second period, social, economic, and political affairs remained marked by the absence of scientific inquiry. This was an age that preceded the enlightenment and the emergence of machines and industrialization. At this point in time, human beings did not yet overcome nature whether in elemental or biological form, and they were still under the prism of objectified religion in the realm of Caesar.

#### *Period three*

The beginning of the third period was brought about by a combination of occurrences. On one hand, the enlightenment gradually led to the dissolution of a long stemming era known as the “dark ages.” The British Glorious revolution and the French revolution resulted in a lessening of monarchical power and the abandonment of a sovereign’s divine right to rule. On the other hand, the creation of the steam engine, the onset of mass urbanization, increases in steel-forging capabilities, ship building improvements, the discovery of new trading and shipping routes, and eventually the advent of electricity led to major changes in how human beings interacted with nature. Humans gained greater control over their natural surroundings than ever before. The third period is described by Berdyaeu as one in which human beings carried out a process of mechanization over nature. The process of mechanization was reliant on two factors – those of scientific and technical control. Here, understandings of causality changed greatly. No longer were causal forces in nature and daily life linked to theism, but rather, the rise of scientific inquiry enabled widespread cognition to emerge

about the properties and materials that make up our world.

The rapid development of industry resulted in stellar cognitive changes in how human beings went about understanding material reality. This was accompanied by a gradual decline in faith and the separating of the state from religious institutions. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the myth of humanism was broken, argued Berdyaev. This led to an abyss opening beneath humanity. Berdyaev conceptualizes this abyss through linking it to the egress of capitalism and the marketization of economic life. A profound implication arose from marketization – for the first time in history, masses of people were necessitated to sell their labor for wages under specified industrial trades. Goncharov (2016) explains how Berdyaev assumed that under such a system people would fall away from faith and God and simply become economic toilers. Increased industrialization, urbanization, and the decline of feudalism changed the structure of economics. The relationship that human beings had with society and politics also transformed. These processes entailed major changes for organized religion. The authority of leading churches, such as the Catholic or Orthodox Church, was eventually stripped away and transferred over to the state – this resulted in a newly found objective totality belonging to statehood.

These dynamics, as one would expect, eventually led to even greater adverse outcomes, specifically in the rise of the totalitarian state and totalitarian ideologies – both of which featured common recognition of “the complete authority of the state and of society” (Berdyaev 1952, 57). This signified an adverse return to what Berdyaev referred to as an ancient, heathen state of human consciousness. The revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the 1917 Russian revolution, were tragic for Berdyaev because those that waged such revolutions failed to recognize the distinction between the realms of spirituality (the everlasting) and of Caesar (the transient). This recognitional failure led to the solidification of both monism and totalitarianism (Berdyaev 1952, 73). Such outcomes can be observed in the philosophies of Hegel, Marx, Auguste Comte, and in social orders such as in communist and fascist regimes, as well as in liberal democracies (Berdyaev 1952, 78). The third period exemplifies how the realm of Caesar always wishes to subject itself to the whole of humanity in its universalizing tendency. This pattern has turned out to be the main tragedy of

history, of freedom, of necessity, and of the human being's destiny (Berdyayev 1952, 79).

*Period four*

The fourth period emerged in the twentieth century and is “the final metamorphosis of the realm of Caesar” (Berdyayev 1952, 48). Berdyayev begins his description of this period by placing emphasis on what he coined as the “disruption of cosmic order” - which occurred when the atom was split and nuclear weaponry was developed. While many international relations experts have since placed great emphasis on both coercive capabilities and stabilizing factors associated with nuclear weapons, Berdyayev saw the creation of the nuclear bomb as a tragedy that paved way for an entirely new relationship that human beings would have in relation to nature and the cosmos. The splitting of the atom solidified the full and total dissolution of organic forms of human organization. Berdyayev emphasized that for the first time in history, a grave new potential to wipe out lifeforms on earth arose. Nuclear weaponry and power could disrupt the universal configuration of space and the makeup of the cosmos. Because of this potential, Berdyayev saw that the realm of Caesar became “terribly augmented” with power that human beings had developed over nature.

Through the usage of machinery and technology, human beings not only learned to control nature, but they continued to improve their systematic manipulation of nature for profit-based motivations. In this sense, the rise of the fourth period did not simply lead to a departure from the third, but rather, it built upon previously established marketization that emerged alongside industrialization. Once the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, nearly all countries in the world adopted a market-based economic system in which profit seeking serves as the principal basis of economic exchange and production. As we are still in the age of economic globalization, the aim of profit-seeking does not appear to be slowing down. This brings us to arguably the most salient development that Berdyayev accurately predicted. He foresaw that this terribly augmented power developed by human beings over nature would lead to enslavement to our own discoveries (Berdyayev 1952, 47).

This is factually correct and can be observed in numerous spheres such as in the widespread necessity of economic growth and its equivalence to “progress,” or more even more significantly, in the creation of artificial intelligence (AI). The

creation of intelligent artificial systems has been made possible by rapidly advancing technological innovation. This has even resulted in the arrival of artificial superintelligence which is a form of intelligence that “significantly exceeds the cognitive performance of humans in most domains” (Murphy 2018). The most common interactions that humans have with AI in today’s world is in their daily usage of the internet and specifically in social networking sites – platforms that are driven by machine learning optimization which is designed to hijack the human dopaminergic system (Murphy 2018). Importantly, the internet is not a random system of connections, but rather is it is closer to what tech-mogul Elon Musk has described as being a pervasive, conscious and interconnected network of machines and humans that is alive.

Berdyayev foresaw the rise of autonomous machinery and spheres of organization that were neither part of nature nor exclusive to human consciousness, he noted that, “machines are made from material elements taken from the old nature, but into them goes something quite new, no longer of nature, and not a part of the old cosmic order” (Berdyayev 1952, 51). In the fourth period, machines and their underlying technology would grow to have a “cosmogonic significance” (Berdyayev 1952, 51). He noted that, “this is a new day of creation – or a new night. Probably night, for the light of the sun may be darkened” (Berdyayev 1952, 51). The important factor to consider here is that Berdyayev specifically classified the fourth period as a time that would experience the creation of a new type of human organization – one that was, “distinct from the organic, technics and mechanization” originally found in the industrial era (Berdyayev 1952, 47). The fourth period does not require sanctification which the realm of Caesar demanded in previous eras as this period contains the final phase of secularization.

What’s more, Berdyayev foresaw that the role of technology and machine-based production would lead to great personal difficulties for human beings because we are insufficiently adapted to handle such augmentations. The great difficulty would come with the “terrible shortening of time, a speed with which man cannot keep pace” (Berdyayev 1952, 51). He foresaw that under such a technical, machine-dominated order of life no single moment would be of value itself as each moment would become, “only a means for the next” (Berdyayev 1952, 51). The shortening of time is manifesting itself in every second of our present life.

The easiest place to observe this is across social media and online forms of communication. Smart-phone equipped individuals carry out actions only for the purpose of obtaining some future reaction to those actions via posting on the internet. This is a highly reciprocal process that leads to our total absorption into autonomously controlled digital technology. One need only to take public transport in any global metropolis whether it be New York City, San Francisco, London, Shanghai, Prague, Moscow, Buenos Aires or Mexico City to observe that out of every given 10 people, a super majority of them are on their smart phones, scrolling through sites that rely on artificial intelligence to curtail informational content to their users. These sites monitor their users' actions, pick up, track and record their location, previous search histories, and then from an unfathomable amount of data, they dictate what piece of information a user will be exposed to next.

The enslaving features of these platforms is not only tied to the fact that they are controlled by algorithmic profit-intensive dynamics, but that they directly influence neuro-chemical reward systems in our brains by sprucing up dopamine levels for some, and lowering them for others. Every new "like" a person receives for a photograph, video, or post triggers a dopamine reaction and when there a lack of "likes" one can fail to experience a positive internal reaction – leading to depressive behavior. This is an adverse, unnatural, and addictive cycle which does not appear to be slowing down. Recent psychiatric research indicates that teenagers who spend three hours or more a day on social media (an amount of hours which is very common), are likelier to develop mental health issues including depression, aggression, anxiety, and antisocial behavior. The alarming issue here is that these problems are likely to develop even if statistical models feature controls for prior mental health issues as well as genetic predispositions (Riehm et al. 2019). Even though word limitations of this present essay disable me from being able to overview this literature in-depth, it is indeed difficult for one to not notice that something terribly inauspicious has arisen in recent decades in the relationship that human beings have to technology. Along these lines, some philosophers have attributed a grave danger to AI. For example, Bostrom (2014) argues that malignant failure modes of AI can lead to human extinction through AI making choices that are completely contradictory to the intent of their programmer(s).

AI is configured by human cognition, but has the ability to compute its own processes which results in artificial mechanistic behavior and decision making. This is the particular autonomous sphere that Berdyaev spoke of and is also the sphere that is already seeking totalitarian recognition. AI utilizes finite components drawn from human intellect (through the code that programs a given intelligence machine), but then develops infinite numbers of models that can influence a given outcome or process empirically. In this sense, AI substitutes human cognition with computation. For the first time in history, important actions are occurring in the empirical world which are outside of human cognition in totality. Perhaps the most salient example of this can be observed in the role that AI is beginning to play in the gravest of all dangers to humanity – nuclear weaponry. The Russian robotic mini-submarine called “Poseidon” was created in the last several years and there are plans for over 30 of these machines to be manufactured for the Russian Navy. With an ability to travel at speeds exceeding 100km per hour, this underwater drone is not only the fastest underwater nuclear capable weapon ever created, but it also contains doomsday plans that it can develop on its own in case of successful nuclear strikes being carried out on Russian soil.

This war machine is capable of detonating nuclear blasts under water or sending nuclear missiles into the air if it cannot receive updating signals (during an attack) from Moscow and other areas of the Russian Federation that have nuclear emergency warning systems. If adversaries of Russia successfully strike its territory to the extent in which there are no human beings left to operate nuclear launch systems and centers on mainland, Poseidon can create an artificial radioactive tsunami that reportedly can range from 300-500 meters in height and can engulf an enemy country’s terrain for hundreds of kilometers (Fakhrutdinov 2018). Although just one example, that super powers are developing such systems based on AI has immense implications for the future. The actions and behavior of AI machines will lead to some of the most important decisions of human history getting made – such as the decision to launch a nuclear weapon during nuclear war. Weapons such as Poseidon exemplify Berdyaev’s categorization and prognosis of the fourth period of our development in relation to nature. Not only has the cosmic rhythm of the universe been disrupted and matter itself been disaggregated, but there are now independent, non-human forces which have the



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power to destroy the world and wipe life forms and human beings off the face of the earth.

*Period Five*

While the fourth period does indeed contain a large number of disheartening developments, Berdyaev conceptualized a fifth period in which he projected that spirituality would overcome the all-encompassing status of the realm of Caesar and technological enslavement that developed in the previous period. In the fifth period, evil and suffering will be alleviated in the world, but this outcome can only occur eschatologically. This will occur through spiritual transformation and the abolition of concentrated authority throughout social orders. As noted by Berdyaev, “every authority, openly or in disguise, has poison within itself. True liberation will come only with the elimination of the idea of sovereignty, regardless of the subject to which this sovereignty applies” (Berdyaev 1952, 85). Berdyaev believed such a transformation will occur, but “the final victory of spirit over Caesar is possible only in the eschatological perspective. Until then, men will live under the hypnosis of authority, and this includes the life of the church, which, itself, may turn out to be one of the forms of Caesar’s realm” (Berdyaev 1952, 80). These end-point views voiced by Berdyaev are characteristics of his thought that have led some (e.g. Young 2012) to classify him into the Russian Cosmism umbrella.

The interesting dynamic here is that Berdyaev does not argue that the state will be dealt away with, but rather, our understanding of the state will fundamentally transform - “Under the conditions of this world, the function of the state will always remain. But the state is of functional and subordinate importance, only” (Berdyaev 1952, 72). We must refuse the sovereignty of the state because the state always tends to reach beyond its boundaries, argued Berdyaev. He believed that concentrated authority was inherent to not only communist and fascist states of the twentieth century, but also to the Christian period of history as observed in totalitarian and monist conceptions of church and empire. Importantly however, this does not entail that a pluralistic democratic formation will emerge in the fifth period. Berdyaev pointed out that pluralism is “bourgeois and capitalist societies are bound up with individualism and are disguised as a form of tyranny by means of capitalist control” (Berdyaev 1952, 58). Berdyaev strongly asserted that when economic materialism is made out to represent

everything “noble in life,” this results in the degradation of human beings. Materialism recognizes only the realm of Caesar and the external, while at the same time it denies the internal. Similar ideas can be observed in Heidegger’s framework and lectures on technology.

Along these lines, Berdyaev articulated a strong case against materialism by positing that it will never be able to function as a framework or ideal that can enable humanity to progress. He assumed that one of the “worst evils” is a utilitarian attitude towards truth (Berdyaev 1952, 91). Basing progress upon economic growth and development is erroneous because economic materialism considers economics as the base of reality, and through this it sets up an illusion of consciousness (Berdyaev 1952, 91). Berdyaev argues economic materialism is indeed a necessary factor of life, but it is not the end nor life’s highest value. It is not its determining cause. This indeed is an interesting factor because in the fifth period Berdyaev presupposes that labor will be dealt with through dignity - “the dignity of labour must be upheld: hence the necessity of ending the exploitation of the workers, hence of ending the exploitation of labour” (Berdyaev 1952, 170). Berdyaev believed that society will get transformed from within, and spirituality will become the basis of social organization. He projected that such a massive change will come from within human beings - “Only a new birth, the birth of the spiritual man, who so long has slumbered and been held down, may be the real appearance of a new man” (Berdyaev 1952, 162).

The inner-spirituality human beings possess cannot be suppressed, “no matter how cruelly necessity presses upon him; man’s thirst for the spiritual will assert itself” (Berdyaev 1952, 170). Human beings will strive to create a new brotherly society, personalist and communautaire. This is premised on Berdyaev’s assumption that in the fifth period, society will not be an object that determines human beings from without (externally), but will be articulated from within. As such, Berdyaev reached for this eschatological transformation through his dynamic conception of freedom - “there is such a thing as the fate of freedom in the world, the existential dialectic of freedom in the world” (Berdyaev 1952, 104). Freedom is the definition of the human being, but it is internal and must be defined from within via spirit, not from without, not from external forces. True freedom, argued Berdyaev, lies outside of causal relationships and the objective world of phenomena.

As the subsequent section will demonstrate, this is a salient commonality that Berdyaev shared with Heidegger. For Berdyaev, it is precisely the “inner creative energy” of human beings that gets suppressed in the fourth period but then comes to light in the fifth (Berdyaev 1952, 105). This is precisely why Berdyaev noted in the concluding segments of his last work that, “if the revolutionary is the new man, then Gandhi is more a revolutionary than Lenin and Stalin” - as the appearance of a new human being is not simply a change of clothes, but it presupposes spiritual change (Berdyaev 1952, 167). Similarly, Berdyaev went great lengths throughout his works to make his position on spirituality distinct from any form of statism. He believed that spiritual realization would happen through a “divine-human process” that would feature an awakening and would take place in “secret ways” (Berdyaev 1953, 142). This process will be made possible by God and the realm of spirit.

#### MAKING SENSE OF THE FUTURE

Without doubt, the most contentious period in Berdyaev’s five period framework is the last period because it describes a future that none of us can predict but can only imagine based on the knowledge we possess in our current time. The futuristic theme in the book under attention is where Berdyaev’s place in Russian Cosmism can be made intelligible. Cosmism was an intellectual movement that emerged in the late 19th century and was developed throughout the first third of the 20th century. Cosmists (the most prominent of which was Nikolai Fedorov) were in favor of technological development and viewed technology as a means to overcome death and achieve universal salvation. The progress of science was viewed to be indefinite, and with science, humans can become immortal and even reincarnate old historical persons. Eventually, scientific progress would enable human beings to be in control of the cosmos and to fulfil the biblical idea of resurrection. Today, Cosmism is gaining increasing ideological prevalence in technocratic circles in Russia (Faure 2021). Young (2012) defines Russian Cosmism in the following way, “a highly controversial and oxymoronic blend of activist speculation, futuristic traditionalism, religious science, exoteric esotericism, utopian pragmatism, idealistic materialism – higher magic partnered to higher mathematics” (Young 2012, 3).

Russian Cosmism intersects between a heterogeneous collection of topics and in this “loose, diverse, and complex tendency,” (Young 2012, 11), Berdyaev’s work

on the Russian soul (in his, *the Russian Idea*) is drawn upon by Young to describe Berdyaev's eschatological ideas on the Russian soul and its position in achieving Russia's eschatological destiny. Interestingly enough, Young's (2012) analysis of Russian Cosmism features an autobiographical chapter of Berdyaev's life, mentions his name 127 times throughout the book as a whole, but does not cite or engage with *the Realm of Caesar and the Realm of Spirit* and its five stages. This is significant because the historical time periods that are categorized in this work, especially the final (fifth) period, appear to share more similarity with Heidegger's ideas on technology, rather than with the technological and scientific characteristics shared by Cosmists. Young (2012) classifies Berdyaev into the "religious Cosmist" category. The religious type stands in contrast to the scientific type and figures as Tsiolkovsky or Chizhevsky, yet it would be farfetched to think that Berdyaev was in any way a proponent of technological advancement. Similarly, although Young acknowledges Berdyaev is somewhat different than other Cosmists, for example, in explaining the collectivist character of Russian Cosmists, Young notes that,

if conflict should arise between the interests of the individual particle and the interests of the whole, the Cosmists would almost unanimously (Berdyaev being the possible dissident) prefer the interests of the whole. (Young 2012, 240).

The issue in such a categorization is that there is too much evidence pointing to Berdyaev's philosophy as being incompatible with the ultimate aims of Cosmism. In *Truth and Revelation* (1953), Berdyaev put forward a number of additional points about what spiritual transformation and an era that will be dominated by spirit. The entire basis of Berdyaev's projection of a future spiritual transformation is that it will take place in the demarcated realm of spirit, away from the realm of Caesar (Berdyaev 1953, 142). Specifically, "the era of the spirit can be nothing but a revelation of sense of community which is not merely social but also cosmic, not only a brotherhood of man, but a brotherhood of men with all cosmic life, with the whole creation" (Berdyaev 1953, 149). This emancipatory transformation will free human beings from social objectification and sociomorphisms that Berdyaev identified in the first four periods of his framework. Berdyaev most likely would have viewed Cosmist ideas of space colonization, scientifically prolonged life spans, immortality, and resurrecting figures of the past (beginning with Adam and Eve; Tucker 2017) to be a dangerous

transgression of the Realm of Caesar because such attempts constitute human efforts of replacing God.

Another example can be observed in Berdyaev's assessment of the most notable of Cosmists (N. Fedorov) Berdyaev described Fedorov's framework as one that was undesirably projective because it shifted the sphere of existing to the sphere of necessity, into projectivism. This shift from what exists to what should exist is projectivism and can also be considered as constituting a brash form of normativity (Medzibrodzky 2014). While I will not problematize Young's (2012) inclusion of who can be considered to be a Russian Cosmist or not (Medzibrodzky 2014 identifies several inconsistencies about the typology as a whole), it is worth considering that Berdyaev believed the spiritual aspect of human nature would take precedence over the technical side, specifically that spirituality would rid society of technocratic elites. This runs counter to the Cosmists' ideas that the state could support some form of transformative and emancipative future in which science and technology could lead to universal salvation and immortality. Perhaps the most powerful statement that Berdyaev put forward against scientific practice is as follows,

[S]cientific discoveries and technical inventions represent the terrible danger of more and more war. The chemists, perhaps quite unselfishly, discover at least partial truth, but the result has been the atomic bomb, which threatens our destruction. This goes on in the realm of Caesar. Salvation can come only by the light of integral Truth, which is revealed in the realm of Spirit. (Berdyaev 1952, 22)

It is commonly acknowledged that Berdyaev saw great danger in technology because of its threat to essential human qualities (Trufanova 2020). This aspect of Berdyaev's thought was likely influenced much more by Heidegger than any specific Russian Cosmist. Throughout the course of the 1930s and 40s, Heidegger developed a number of different ideas about technology which were eventually summarized to publics in the Bremen and Freiburg Lectures (1949). Heidegger claimed that technology coincided with and even infused itself with the natural sciences. The prominence of the latter shifted the ways in which we view the world in our everyday activities through concepts such as space and time. The constant need to rationalize, systematize, and measure phenomena that we encounter in the world illustrates our reliance on technology in which scientific understandings of the world take precedence. Since scientific and technological modes of thinking take prominence over other forms of

understanding and perception, Heidegger argued that they restrict our mode of being by limiting us to understanding the world through a predominant technological lens (Blitz 2014).

A grave threat here is that such thinking can eventually morph into being the only way of thinking that human beings experience. The framework Heidegger articulated is referred to as *Gestell* (positionality) and is premised on the assumption that human beings reduce phenomena to resources that are waiting to be fit into some form of technological system. *Gestell* gathers different types of entities in a certain way and predispositions them into technological structures or systems (James et al., 2018). This obscures human creativity and limits our possibilities to engage in other types of being and experience. Nevertheless, Heidegger did see a way out of this conundrum by arguing that technological domination over the human being can be resolved by *Gelassenheit*. This term roughly translates into “tranquility,” and was proposed as a form of releasement from technology. It is also what Wendland et al. (2018) refer to as an essential mode of existence for human beings. *Gelassenheit* releases us from our will to dominance and brings us closer to the possibility of encountering phenomena in a natural way. It renounces the necessity of technology through self-restraint and can possibly enable us to be free from it. Wendland et al. (2018) note that the term is theological in its origin because it has roots in Meister Eckhart (a 13th century German mystic) whose writings Berdyaev frequently engaged with along with Jacob Boehme.

For these reasons, it is much more plausible to believe that Berdyaev’s fifth period was at odds with the grand ideas found in Russian Cosmism (most of which are premised on the notion of future governmentality existing), and fall somewhere closer to Heidegger’s technological framework.<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This essay has investigated Nikolai Berdyaev’s framework and classification of

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Berdyaev fully agreed with all of Heidegger’s philosophy; he particularly took issue with the concept of Dasein and Heidegger’s assumptions about the problem of truth; he notably argued that “it is incomprehensible why man (Dasein) can come to know truth” (Berdyaev 1952, 15).

periods of human history. Berdyaev's views on the specific positioning humanity has experienced in relation to nature have been overviewed in among the first accounts of this subject to date. The present essay is the first to directly engage with his meta-historical articulation of different historical periods. These periods began in early recorded history in a time in which human beings did not yet overcome nature nor did they fully develop what Berdyaev conceptualizes as personality. Subsequent to the first period, the second period was marked by the emergence of early Christianity and the objectification of Christ's message along with Christianity's merging with the realm of Caesar. In the third period, intellectual changes brought about by the enlightenment along with industrialization resulted in humanity gaining control over nature for the first time in history. This process was sped up and exacerbated in the fourth period – a period that saw the disruption of cosmic order, the emergence of nuclear weapons, autonomous forms of organization (artificial intelligence), and widespread societal enslavement to our own discoveries.

This essay also gave attention to the fifth period and indeed, this classification is arguably the most difficult to assess of any of the periods as Berdyaev believed that the realm of spirit would be solidified sometime in the centuries ahead, that the exploitation of labor would end, and an eschatological spiritual transformation would arise. Although he passed away in 1948, the work Berdyaev produced in the final years of his life ended up accurately predicting a genuinely impressive set of developments that emerged long after his passing. This is particularly the case if we consider the fourth period and subsequent occurrences that arose after his death in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. The digital age of information and the prevalence of the world wide web has resulted in a state of affairs wherein human beings have grown to be more disconnected from natural phenomena than ever before, and simultaneously have become entrenched into the realm of Caesar – a realm that is now dominated by technologically functioning statehood as well as machines and autonomously operating algorithmic systems.

While it would be unfeasible to expect any theorist, philosopher or historian to predict major developments that will arise deep into the next centuries of history, Berdyaev's projections in his fifth period can be intelligently addressed nevertheless. One plausible point of view can take shape along the following (pessimistic) route: Berdyaev's projections voiced in his fifth period are not going

to be realized because humanity will not be able to overcome globalized neoliberal capitalism. Nation states are only growing in their power and bureaucratic capacity, rather than shrinking. As the total global population keeps growing, more and more people are going to need government, its services, and in some cases, representation. Likewise, profit-driven economic growth (and materialism more broadly) will indefinitely take the front seat and wipe away all alternative ideas on social order in the name of name of “technological progress.” Spiritual beliefs and participation in religious institutions are declining across much of the developing world (cross-nationally), and there is little in the way from slowing this trend down. Human beings may get even further enslaved to their own technological discoveries (e.g. virtual reality), rather than emancipated from them.

In contrast, a more optimistic oriented route can be conceptualized with regard to Berdyaev’s fifth period: technological progress will help solve the problem of exploitative labor. Human beings may have to work far less than required today, and issues of clean water, food access, and healthcare will be solved because of automation and technological discoveries. This will provide never-before-seen opportunities for spiritual practice, self-realization, and positively contribute to the development of personality. Due to automation and the development of widely accessible and functional quantum computing, problems of the modern age will no longer arise and the need for a mass bureaucratic structure (as observed today in nation states) will no longer be necessary. The role of the state will be more symbolic than practical – as it will electronically administer universal basic income to half of its population (and potentially much more than half). Human beings will be in communion with one another through realizing their spiritual quality in a period that will see the realm of spirit reign supreme over that of the realm of Caesar.

Although time will be the only determinant of either of the above two routes, one would hope the latter takes precedence over the former.

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