ABSTRACT. In Il’enkov’s “Cosmology of mind,” written in his younger days in the tradition of Spinoza and Engels, the thinking mind appears as a necessary attribute of matter. Like all other main forms of matter in motion, the mind has its cosmic purpose and predestination. Il’enkov argued that it has to close the beginning and the end of the Big Cycle in order to return the dying Universe to its fiery youth. Il’enkov believed that this is the sole way to save the Universe from “thermal death” following the inevitable increase in entropy.

KEY WORDS: cosmology, entropy, Il’enkov, life, matter, mind, philosophy of nature, Soviet Marxism

As far back as his post-graduate years E.V. Il’enkov wrote an article whose title was reminiscent of the treatises of the 17th century – “Cosmology of mind. An attempt to outline the objective role of thinking matter in the system of world interaction (philosophical-poetic phantasmagoria, based on the principles of dialectical materialism).” The title is typical of Il’enkov’s self-irony, which does not mean that it was just a mystification. Actually, it was a result of meditations concerning an important problem: if and why the Universe is in need of mind. Every genuine philosopher frames the question in a certain way; if he or she fails to ask this question, this is evidence of the deficiency of his or her philosophy.

Il’enkov’s statement was inspired by some considerations in the late writings of Engels concerning the so-called “main forms of motion” as attributes of matter. In Engels’ classification of the forms of motion, the highest and the most complicated form is the social form or, in other words, the mind. Engels was convinced that matter does not develop beyond this form. At least in the space to human perception there is no form more complex than mind.
According to Engels, this highest form of matter’s motion continues the line of development that runs from mechanical physical, chemical, and biological forms. Each occupies its particular place in world interaction. No higher form can exist without the lower, e.g. the physical form is impossible without the mechanical, the chemical without the physical, the biological without the chemical, and without biology human beings, possessing our social organization and mind, could not exist. Each of these forms, as we see, performs its purpose. However, in this line of thinking, the highest form is as it were “suspended” since it is just the consequence and the aim of the preceding forms. But what is the aim of mind? What is its purpose?

If there exists no higher form for which we should be a necessary condition as a “building block,” then the only solution is to join “the end” to “the beginning,” and then the aim of the mind appears to be to maintain the entire line, thus consolidating the whole system of interaction in the world. This is how Il’enkov argued in his “Cosmology of mind.” He thought that by understanding the mind’s role, the mind becomes a necessary and not an accidental phenomenon in the Universe.

When medieval teleology fell into disrepute, explaining that cats exist in order to eat mice and a man exists in order to glorify the wisdom of the Creator, the mechanical science of nature substituted the question “why” for the question “for what purpose.” But that does not mean that the question “for what purpose” is senseless. When we speak of an isolated phenomenon, of a stone falling off a cliff, for example, then only the question “why” is possible. But if it is a question about a detail, for example about a part of some mechanical system, then we have a right to raise the question “what is this part for?” and “what purpose does it serve?”

Il’enkov proceeded from the idea that “tseloe” (whole) and “tsel” (aim, purpose) are not just cognate words: something can have its purpose within some whole or system only. Correspondingly, the life of a human being has sense only so long as he or she is striving for something. Schopenhauer was right to think that the Universe is meaningless if it is but a congestion of mechanical bodies. However, if the Universe is