# Thinking Machines, Petrified Ideals

## Ilyenkov and the Problem of AI

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*Based on Potapov & Di Paolo, "Development Beyond Information", Human Development, 2026*

*Traditional "learning" activity… reduces to the process of assimilating ready-made knowledge, ready-made information, and ready-made conceptions, i.e. it is realized as the activity of the embodying of ready-made images in language and (inversely) of the "visualization" of verbally formed conceptions.*

Ilyenkov, *Activity and Knowledge* (1974), trans. P. Moxhay

*This means organizing the process of assimilating knowledge as knowledge of the object… that stubbornly exists outside of and completely independent of consciousness (and of language). Not as a separate "thing" that we can always specially consider and represent while ignoring its surroundings, but precisely as a system of things possessing their own language-independent organization and connections – as a concrete whole.*

Ilyenkov, *Activity and Knowledge* (1974), trans. P. Moxhay

# The language model completes the project of verbalism

Knowledge about every object.
Activity on no object.

# Two pictures of development

## The equation

To develop is to acquire information and learn to deploy it appropriately.

Measured by how closely machine performance approaches ours




## Our claim

Development is a history a person undergoes, in which what changes is what one can want, attend to, and be answerable for.

# Where does the ideal exist?

The ideal: everything with meaning, value or significance for us.



# A musical example



Objective without being physical; ideal without being mental.

The ideal is “the reflection of the objective world in the forms of man’s activity; in the forms of his consciousness and will.”

Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic*, Aakar edition, p. 252

The person is to be found “not within an individual body but precisely external to it, in the interrelations of this given individual body with another body through things located in the space between them.”

Ilyenkov (1984), p. 329

# Two modes of the ideal

## Living

Enacted and modified in response to the situation and activity.

## Petrified

Deposited in notation, instruments, institutions, texts.

Every enactment of an ideal form involves its modification and concretisation in response to “specific conditions, new social needs, [and] the peculiarities of the material.”

Ilyenkov (1977), p. 92

# The model as petrified ideality

## Shuffled

The corpus is mixed so no sequence above the document survives. Its history is removed on purpose.

## Judged by a fossil

It never meets a rater, only a frozen reward model averaged into one number.

## Fixed

After training, only the information available changes. A version history, not a biography.

# The deposit cannot reconstitute the movement

Specify the mastery as a rule or regularity → A further piece of sediment → Which needs a further act of uptake

Only living activity that takes the sediment up stops the regress.

# Four conditions of becoming a person

| Condition | For a person | In the model |
|---|---|---|
| Historicity | An irreversible trajectory | A shuffled corpus |
| Reciprocity | Meaning achieved together, through breakdown and repair | Criteria never renegotiated |
| Orientation | Others show what matters and what counts as information | Everything weighted as data |
| Care | Relations whose aims shift with the person | A fixed objective, optimised |



“If what we do instructionally achieves the instructional end—A learns X—we have succeeded instructionally but, if A hates X and his teacher as a result, we have failed educationally.”

Noddings, *Caring* (2013), p. 174

The architect operates on his drawing “as with an object distinct from himself.” In revising it he revises the future house “ideally, potentially.”

Ilyenkov (1977), p. 91

“He thus alters his internal state, externalising it, and operating with it as with an object distinct from himself.”

Ilyenkov (1977), p. 91

# The model is neither architect nor house

It is an objectification.

# Nothing in the technology decides how we relate to the forms we inherit

## A medium

through which thought develops

## An authority

to which thought is deferred

The individual may master an ideal form only as “a rigid pattern and sequence of operations,” without understanding its origin or its relation to the reality it came from.

Ilyenkov (1977), p. 92

“Strictly speaking, it is not the individual who operates with the ideal image but the dogmatised image that acts in and through the individual.”

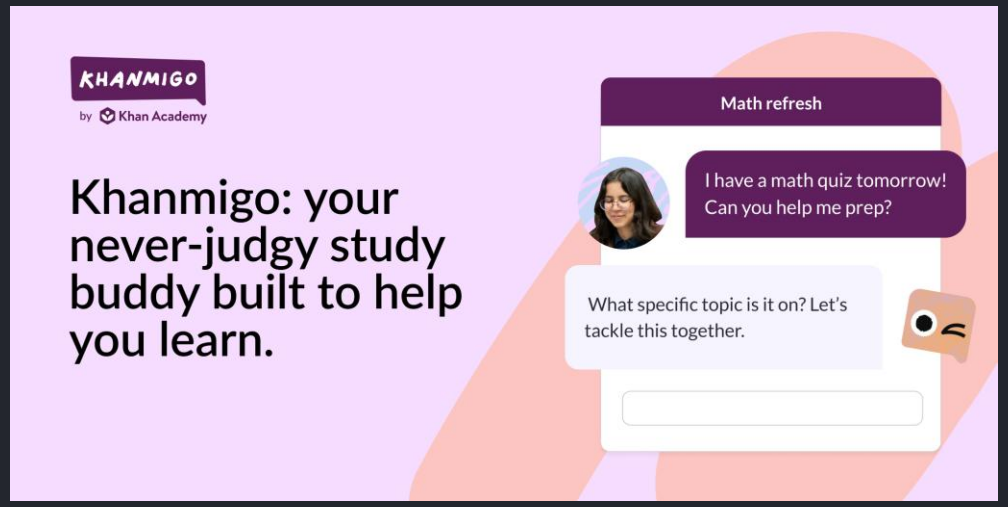
Ilyenkov (1977), p. 92

Historically produced forms confront their creators as “a system of unarguable rules coming inevitably from somewhere out of the blue.”

Ilyenkov (1977), p. 92

# A better design can change how a person stands to the inherited form.

It cannot stand in that relation for them.



*Real thinking is formed precisely when the work of language is indissolubly joined to the work of the hands – the organs of direct-object activity. Not hands drawing letters, words, and "statements" on paper, but hands making things, i.e. changing obstinate, intractable, and capricious matter… Only thus does the object reveal itself as the thing in itself, compelling us to reckon with it more than with words or with "schemas" that "visualize" those words.*

Ilyenkov, *Activity and Knowledge* (1974), trans. P. Moxhay

The educational question is not how closely AI can approximate the achievements of human development, but

# whether our tools and institutions continue to cultivate them.

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