



Is There Hope? Emancipation Philosophy through Plurality and Cosmology

Tory Schendel-Vyvoda

Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, Portland, UNITED STATES

Received: 23 February 2025 ▪ Revised: 7 July 2025 ▪ Accepted: 20 July 2025

Abstract

In *Inhuman* by Jean-François Lyotard, it is stated that after the Sun's death, there will be no one left to acknowledge it. While this scientific reality may seem nihilistic, there is room for hope. In this article, I argue that plurality and cosmological thinking enable emancipatory philosophy. I reference philosophers Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Gianni Vattimo to illustrate the diversity of human experience, challenging the notion of universal human history. Furthermore, I examine how the Earth and the cosmos reflect each other through Foucault's *The Order of Things* and analyze the Norse concept of Ragnarök in relation to the demise of the Milky Way. By recognizing interconnectedness amid the impending solar catastrophe, a gentler human consciousness could emerge, as the material from the solar explosion could spark the formation of a new galaxy, potentially fostering life once more. The blast may signal a new beginning rather than an end.

Keywords: plurality, cosmology, emancipation, Norse, Foucault

In *Inhuman* by Jean-François Lyotard, he writes, "...after the Sun's death there won't be a thought to know that its death took place... In 4.5 billion years there will arrive the demise of your phenomenology and your utopian politics, and there'll be no one there to toll the death knell or hear it. It will be too late to understand that your passionate, endless questioning always depended on a 'life of the mind' that will have been nothing else than a covert form of earthly life" (Lyotard, 1991: 9). With the looming catastrophic doom for humans, it is expected to question if our existence has any meaning and what it means to be human since everything perceived thing on Earth and throughout the Milky Way Galaxy will be annihilated during the solar explosion.

While this scientific fact seems nihilistic, what if there is hope throughout this transaction? In this paper, I argue that plurality and cosmological thinking allow emancipation philosophy to flourish. To support this hypothesis, I will use philosophers Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Gianni Vattimo to champion the plurality of human experience by dismantling the fable of a universal human history. Second, I will discuss how the Earth and the cosmos mirror one another by focusing on Foucault's book, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*. Finally, I will analyze how the Norse Ragnarök relates to the demise of the Milky Way Galaxy. By celebrating how humans are interconnected throughout the cosmos through the solar demise, perhaps people are capable of elevating to a conscious awareness that calls for a gentler humankind that can find emancipation through existence because, ultimately, the matter

dispersed by the solar explosion will be used to form another galaxy, potentially one with humans. If so, the solar blast is not an end but only a new beginning.

How do humans grapple with the thought of our solar demise? Infrequent before the contemporary consciousness, there was a general lack of awareness of myth (Vattimo, 2007: 28). Grand narratives and universal principles, dogmas, or religions worked toward lumping humans into one story due to language. According to Foucault, “language gives the perpetual disruption of time” (p. 124). When these disruptions form patterns, the words turn themselves into distinct spaces of representation or periods, which is then coined as history by humans (Foucault, 2005: 123). Since the Enlightenment, “human history is seen as an ongoing process of emancipation as if it were the perfection of the human ideal” (Vattimo, 2007: 2). However, this apparent linear history of “uninterrupted of truth and reason” (Foucault, 2005: IX) is only a fable. As noted by Lyotard, history is not only unilinear but there is no history in which one can speak of progress (Lyotard, 1991: 2). Reflected through language, history is generally organized around the year zero with the birth of Christ, and this initiates “a serial train of events in the life of peoples from the ‘center’ of the West” (ibid.) in which everything outside the grand narrative is “primitive” and uncivilized awaiting the day for the West to save the others from savagery (ibid.). Furthermore, Vattimo agrees with Lyotard by noting that perpetuating a universal history with linear narratives was used to mute, repress, and exclude voices to maintain power and control through the guise of emancipation (Vattimo, 2007: 67-68).

When commenting on grand narratives and unilinear time, Lyotard specifically attacks “human narcissism” (p. 45). According to him, the most famous human narcissism that must be debunked are “man is not the centre of the cosmos (Copernicus), is not the first living creature (Darwin), is not the master of meaning (Freud)” (ibid.). Even Foucault states that humans are not “[a] mysterious instrument with powers known only to a few privileged persons” (Foucault, 2005: 41) nor are they above nature, as Lyotard states, “A human being isn’t different from nature” (Lyotard, 1991: 12). By removing the self-important stance and hierarchical superiority humans have placed on themselves through ideas, languages, values, and other forms of communication, Lyotard calls for the abandonment of a singularized emancipation philosophy (Lyotard, 1991: 62). Dismantling the “classical” modern metaphysics of singular narratives, especially on emancipation, allows “its users to stock more information, to improve their competence and optimize their performances,” or a plurality of human experiences to enter the forefront of historical consciousness.

In *The Transparent Society*, Gianni Vattimo argues, “the dissolution of the idea of history and the end of modernity is the advent of the society of communication” (p. 4). He illustrates that every human experiences a plurality of lived experiences, and due to the modern era, there is a conscious awareness of this multiplicity of experience (Vattimo, 2007: 70). Amplified by mass media, the continuous exposure to information further dissolves any claim of a universal history, and raising awareness of plurality causes a fundamental shift from previous philosophical thought. For example, Immanuel Kant championed “the expectation that the consensus of each and every human being worthy of the name would coalesce around the values of bourgeois ‘beauty’” (ibid.). The dangers of continuing any Kantian thought, of the sublime or the historico-political writings, “is to shelter the humanist prejudice under his authority” (Lyotard, 1991: 1). Despite Kant’s critique of art and how good his intentions, politicians, philosophers, teachers, and other impactful professions on societies since the invention of writing, however more profound during the Enlightenment, have excelled at weaponizing words to administer control and power structures that dehumanize other people who do not submit to the perceived universal ideas created by great thinkers like Kant.

Through the dissolution of universal histories and breaking down linear time, humans can then reevaluate emancipation philosophies through a more complex and even chaotic paradigm that removes humans, and even the Earth, from the center of the conversation (Vattimo,

2007: 4). With the evolution of modernity and techno-science, advancing technologies and more collective access to information have allowed most humans the opportunity to explore ideas outside the confines of their environment. As reflected by Lyotard, “micro-physics and cosmology inspire... today’s philosopher” (p. 45). With access to a newer plurality of “tales,” as noted by Vattimo, humans are capable of freeing themselves from “the inflexibility of monological tales and the dogmatic systems of myth” (Vattimo, 2007: 26). This self-transparency enabled by modernity and human sciences will be explored through cosmology.

In the chapter “Prose of the Word” in Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, he discusses how the universe is folded upon itself, and representation is posited as a form of repetition in which life mirrors nature (p. 17). He furthers this analogy of resemblance between the Earth and the universe by stating:

The stars are the matrix of all the plants and every star in the sky is only the spiritual prefiguration of a plant, such that it represents that plant, and just as each herb or plant is a terrestrial star looking up at the sky, so also each star is a celestial plant in spiritual form, which differs from the terrestrial plants in matter alone . . . , the celestial plants and herbs are turned towards the Earth and look directly down upon the plants they have procreated, imbuing them with some particular virtue (Foucault, 2005: 22-23).

As a category of thought, the interplay of duplicated resemblances to all the realms of nature assures that everything will find its mirror and its macrocosmic justification on another larger scale, like how the plants are reflected in the universe. This affirmation asserts that the cosmic order, even in the highest spheres, will be found reflected in the darkest depths of the Earth (Foucault, 2005: 34-35).

Given the idea that the universe is folded upon itself and all creation mirrors itself, Foucault indicates that greater worlds than Earth must exist because everything is a resemblance; however, he cautions that despite the immense distance from the microcosm to macrocosm, it cannot be infinite (ibid.). He continues, “Consequently, the similitudes that, through the action of the signs they require, always rest one upon another, can cease their endless flight. They have a perfectly closed domain to support and buttress them. Nature, like the interplay of signs and resemblances, is closed in upon itself in conformity with the duplicated form of the cosmos” (p. 35). This cyclical motion of the universe continually folding upon itself to create a multiplicity of worlds throughout the cosmos means “matter [is] taken as an arrangement of energy created, destroyed and recreated over and over again” (Vattimo, 2007: 7). Since the Earth is an arrangement of matter and energy, the cosmic arrangement is transitory and only lasts a few billion years, which is “not a long time considered on a cosmic scale” (Vattimo, 2007: 9). With the dissolution of grand narratives regarding human existence and the broader acceptance of the plurality of experience, especially on a cosmic scale, when confronted with realities like Lyotard’s statement, “After the sun’s death, there won’t be a thought to know that its death took place” (p. 9), there is hope for the continuation of human thought that contradicts Lyotard’s strong claim and some of Vattimo’s call that techno-science and the current view of modernity embrace emancipation philosophy.

When reflecting on how humans can think in a plurality of existence and cosmologically, a group of people predating the modern age successfully, at least in archaeological and written records, lived this methodology. From approximately 793 to 1066 CE, there lived a Nordic culture of craftspeople, farmers, warriors, and explorers who traveled across Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America (Vikings, 2024: 6). While this culture is referred to as “the Vikings,” this categorization is a misnomer and false representation of an entire group of people who emerged during the Stone Age (ibid.). Nonetheless, these Nordic people reached a level of conscious awareness through their version of modernity, as their language experienced

disruptions (Foucault, 2005: 124) that balanced a multiplicity of lived experiences in a cosmological order.

With giants, trolls, elves, Vanirgods, and more, to be a Norse person in the historical context of its former existence meant believing in a plurality of experiences in which nine worlds existed in the cosmos. Within the cosmic order, Midgard, or the Earth, is sometimes poorly translated as “Middle Earth,” giving the perception that the Nordic people believed to be central in the cosmos. This is false as Midgard means “inhabited” in Norse cosmology and is only above *Muspel* (World of Fire), *Hel & Nifl Heim* (Underworld), and *Darkalf Heim* (World of the Gnomes) (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1967, *Introduction*). Without techno-science, the Norse people were capable of conceiving and accepting a “modern mythology” that had multiple dimensions, and there was a narrative of how humans came into existence without a grand narrative. Instead, humans were simply a byproduct of previous cosmic events (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1967: 26), similar to how humans are viewed in a modern techno-science world in which humans are the byproduct of the Big Bang and are comprised of elements, such as “stars, particles, cells, the individuals of a living species” (Lyotard, 1991: 48).

Within the plurality of experiences and Nordic cosmological order, interestingly, there was a built-in narrative within their ethnocultural world that “there will arrive the demise of... earthly life” (Lyotard, 1991: 9), including the eight other worlds. First recorded in the tenth-century *Codex Regius*, and then in the early fourteenth-century *Hauksbok*, the Norse story of the Ragnarök, otherwise known as the day of reckoning (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1967: 140), is the demise of all the gods and worlds alike (Sturluson, 2014: 3). In the section, *Voluspa* (Seeress's Prophecy), Odin, the god and ruler of the Norse cosmos, visits a seeress who can remember before the beginning of the gods and can see as far ahead as after Ragnarök (ibid.). She tells him all he knows will cease and that there will be nothing left of him or his people's existence. Unlike the Bible, in which the *Apocalypse* appears towards the end of the codex, the *Voluspa* is the first poem of the *Codex Regius*. Like in Lyotard's *Inhuman*, the reader is quickly confronted with the reality that their existence will end on a cosmic scale. Before Ragnarök, the different living beings and worlds collided with one another through a series of stories recorded in the *Codex Regius*. These stories were presented as a unilinear history of the Norse, with no linear perspective or a singular grand narrative. The poems are just a series of Nordic cosmic events (Sturluson, 2014). Nonetheless, the only linear recording arises during the Ragnarök.

When Ragnarök occurs, the Earth is “split open, all the way to the world of the dead, and all the bonds of the world broke with a twang...No longer was anyone bound by anything” (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1967: 143). The sky also split, and through the cracks burst fire. Everything is set ablaze (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1967: 146), and the Sun and moon are swallowed (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1967: 150). The cosmos is plunged into darkness, and “Yggdrasil, the world tree, broke and fell” (ibid.). As the fiery explosion continues, “The sea rose above the mountains and fell crashing over the land. The air trembled, the stars were ripped from the sky as burning Earth disappeared under the waves, and the sacred halls of Asgard toppled and fell” (ibid.). Whether prophecy or modern science, the Norse, like the Milky Way Galaxy, and all worlds in the cosmos will meet the same fate.

One of the most influential visuals of Ragnarök is the eleventh-century northern portal of the Urnes Stave Church (Figure 1). Located in Norway, the carvings on the north exterior wall depict vines, dragons, snakes, and other beasts. The snake is interpreted as Níðhögg, who is shown eating the roots of Yggdrasil, or the world tree, and in another scene, fighting a dragon. The battle of the beasts represents the onset of Ragnarök and signifies the ending of the world. The engagement of the carvings is imperative to the Nordic as it highlights how every living creature, human, animal, plant, etc., is connected, and when the world meets its fiery end, all will be swallowed up. However, the byproduct of this cosmic tragedy is the creation of new life that will perpetuate the cycle of a pluralistic cosmic experience. While there is no escape, if one is willing

to parcel through the written texts of Ragnarök or a modern astronomy book, it is possible to find life-affirming positivity during this transaction of cosmic demise.



Figure 1. Urnes, Norway, Portal, set into wall of later stave church, 11th century. Image Source: Artsy

Before the Sun was swallowed, it is recorded in the *Codex Regius* that the Sun rapidly gave birth to a daughter. The daughter grew as big and bright as her mother Sun and rose to shine in the sky. A new moon and stars eventually appeared, which then led to the creation of another Earth-like planet. Plants, animals, and eventually a maiden and a youth stepped out onto this newly forged Earth. Without a grand narrative, these descendants would be the new humans who will play their part in the cosmic order (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1967: 152). Whether it took “4.5 billion years” or not, the Nordic cosmos was destroyed; however, the matter ejected from this transaction was taken and recreated, which will happen “over and over again” (Vattimo, 2007: 7). Once recreated, it will be a universe that is folded upon itself and be one of the greater worlds where life mirrors itself, as expressed by Foucault (pp. 34-35).

Regardless if it is called the Nordic cosmos or the Milky Way Galaxy, when the Sun explodes, all the matter involved in the burst will be repurposed to form new stars, suns, people, and life, and through this modern myth is the philosophy of emancipation. According to Vattimo, accepting one’s own nihilistic destiny while discarding metaphysical principles is the final epoch of metaphysics that can be achieved in which one is subjected to their provenance instead of an *arche* (pp. 118-119). By looking at one’s own cosmology and plurality of lived experiences, “the subject, on its part, is less and less a center of self-consciousness and decision-making, reduced as it is to being the author of statistically predicted choices, playing a multiplicity of social roles that are irreducible to a unity” (Vattimo, 2007: 117). With no definable unity, the person is emancipated through the hermeneutics of their interpretation because the only fact is that the Sun will explode. Anything else is only a rendition.

In conclusion, while it seems startling to conceptualize that the Milky Way Galaxy will someday cease to exist, it is equally reassuring to comprehend that this cosmic disaster is part of life in the universe. There are no grand narratives or universal histories where humans are above nature. Instead, humans belong alongside nature, and when the time comes, the matter ejected from a deceased person will be reworked to form something new. Therefore, instead of trying to fit into systems of control and prejudice, plurality and cosmological thinking allow one to lift the veil of oppression to experience emancipation. In doing so, humans are then able to celebrate our current existence and enjoy simply being alive through our multiplicity of experiences here on Earth.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Foucault, M. (2005). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. Routledge.
- D'Aulaire, I., & D'Aulaire, E. P. (1967). *Norse gods and giants*. Doubleday Books for Young Readers.
- Gianni Vattimo. (2007). *The transparent society*. Cambridge; Malden: Polity Press.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1991). *The inhuman: Reflections on time*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Sturluson, S. (2014). *The poetic Edda* (C. Larrington, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Who Were the Vikings and What Were They Called? (2024, November 25). *Vikings*, 6.

Image source

Urnes, Norway | Portal, Set into Wall of Later Stave Church (11th century) | Artsy. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/urnes-norway-portal-set-into-wall-of-later-stave-church>.

