

## Social and philosophical problems in Isaac Asimov's novel "The End of Eternity"

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**Abstract.** In this paper, the author analyzed the socio-philosophical problems described in the novel "The End of Eternity" and identified the features of the transmission of the author's intention, the originality of scientific assumptions, genre originality and the presence of a "double" thematic bottom, which turned the novel into one of the most outstanding pieces of science fiction in modern literature.

**Key words:** *social science fiction, Asimov, "The End of Eternity", technocratic utopia, novel of prevention.*

**Annotatsiya.** Ushbu maqolada "Abadiyatning oxiri" romanini zamonaviy ilmiy-fantastik adabiyotning ajoyib asarlaridan biriga aylantirgan va romanida ustalik bilan tasvirlangan ijtimoiy-falsafiy muammolarni, yozuvchi maqsadini etkazishning bir qator xususiyatlarini, ilmiy taxminlarning ajoyibligini, janr o'ziga xosligini va "ikki" tematik tubning mavjudligi muallif tomonidan aniqladi va tahlil qilindi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** *ijtimoiy fantastika, Azimov, "Abadiylikning oxiri", texnokratik utopiya, ogohlantiruvchi roman.*

**Аннотация.** В данной статье автор не только проанализировал социально-философские проблемы, описанные в романе «Конец Вечности», но и выявил ряд особенностей передачи авторского замысла, оригинальность научных допущений, жанровое своеобразие и наличие «двойного» тематического дна, что превратило роман в одно из выдающихся произведений современной научно-фантастической литературы.

**Ключевые слова:** *социальная научная фантастика, Азимов, «Конец Вечности», технократическая утопия, роман-предостережение.*

Science fiction, according to the conviction of American science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, is called upon to “systematically explore possible paths of social development, warn about dangerous trends and, most importantly, make rational thinking about the fate of humanity” [1, 3]. Today, the increasing popularity of the genre only increases the moral and social responsibility of science fiction writers. In modern literature, the requirements for the social and philosophical content of works are quite high. The absence of pressing social themes and problems in some works is the reason that critics begin to classify them as entertainment literature. In science fiction literature of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the socio-philosophical content came primarily from a warning against some of the dangerous tendencies of an antagonistic society that could lead humanity to the state depicted in Isaac Asimov's novel titled as “The End of Eternity”. For a long time, “The End of Eternity” was a victim of primitive ideas about social science fiction and was regarded as a dark prophecy, as a reactionary technocratic utopia [3, 32]. To a certain extent, this is true, but the paradox is that at the same time, Asimov’s socio-philosophical science fiction itself is a critique of technocratic utopias [2, 236].

There are many good reasons why social science fiction in the West has never risen to the level of creating progressive (anti)utopias about the future; its highest achievement remained the acutely social novel of prevention. Asimov explains this phenomenon by the social conditions in which American science fiction writers lived and worked: “For a person accustomed to looking at things from the American point of view, an optimistic vision of modern society is unacceptable... I use science fiction to criticize society. In fact, my colleagues do the same” [1, 3].

“The End of Eternity” is a science fiction novel with a “double” bottom. No doubt, the theme of time travel itself arouses the reader’s natural curiosity, and the intensely dramatic plot and clash of characters capture the imagination. But the author's innermost thoughts, however, lie much deeper than the external

developments of events in the novel. To get to this “second” bottom and get a true idea of what fears and hopes Asimov wanted to share with his readers, one must take into account the oppressive spiritual atmosphere in which the creative intelligentsia of the U.S. found itself at that time. Their concern for the fate of humanity and civilization is associated with the colossal concentration of economic wealth and political power in the hands of privileged classes. Relying on these potentially limitless material resources placed at their disposal by the development of science, monopolies (corporations) have already begun to establish their undivided power in society. To strengthen their dominance, they did not use physical repression, but manipulated the consciousness of people, instilled in them the appropriate way of thinking and behavior through a carefully developed system of scientific methods of influencing human consciousness. Under the guise of creating a better future, American corporations have actually usurped the right to uncontrollably dispose of the benefits of civilization and the destinies of entire nations. Such trends, according to science fiction writers and scientists (including Aldous Huxley, Erich Fromm, Ray Bradbury) are incomparably more dangerous even than fascism in its traditional form, since it is not realized by ordinary people.

Asimov realized social consequences of scientific-technological progress more clearly and deeply than many of American philosophers and sociologists. For Asimov, technocratic monopolism is not a fatal outcome, but only one of the possible consequences of scientific progress if it is supposed to be used in the selfish interests of a privileged minority.

The main hero of “The End of Eternity” comes to realize the danger gradually. At the beginning, Harlan does not question the wisdom of the Eternities who established order, nor the Eternals' right to intervene and change human history at their discretion. Moreover, this order seems to him the only fair one, and the activity of the Eternals is dictated solely by concern for the well-being of the human race. “The Eternity,” he teaches, “is not fun or entertainment for bored people. We work day and night. We are carrying out the greatest mission. We calculate unrealized possibilities, and their number is infinite, but among them we need to find the best,

and then we look for the moment of Time when an insignificant action will turn this possibility into reality, but the best reality is not the limit, and we are again looking for new opportunities, and it is endless process..." [4, 271]

Under the influence of various circumstances, Harlan, however, begins to waver in his beliefs, instilled in him during the process of training and upbringing. He is increasingly outraged by the hierarchical system with its "higher" and "lower" castes, where at the social bottom there are ordinary people - "timers", abducted from reality to serve the Eternals. He learns about intrigues among the Eternals, about their use of devices for eavesdropping and surveillance, about sophisticated methods of dealing with violators of established orders. He eventually discovers that Eternity itself is less like an idealized castle of knowledge and enlightenment, and more like a totalitarian monarchy. In the course of dramatic clashes with reality, as well as in the process of personal experiences, Harlan reconsiders the moral values that guided him before. His confidence in the correctness and infallibility of the Eternals in relation to the inhabitants of Time is shaken by Noys' remark: "But this is a crime! How dare you? Who allowed the Eternals to control our destiny?" [1, 198]

With extraordinary artistic skill and psychological tact, the writer shows how protest grows in the soul of his hero, endowed with a heightened sense of social justice. Prompted at first by the desire only to reform and improve the social system within Eternity, Harlan comes to the decision to completely destroy the Eternity.

In "The End of Eternity," Asimov addresses the "eternal" philosophical and moral problem – the conflict between the goal and the means of achieving it. The problem, over the solution of which entire generations of thinkers struggled in the past, has acquired exceptional urgency in our era, when the development of science and technology has put incomparable means of destruction and creation into the hands of people, placing humanity in a dilemma: for what purposes will they be consumed. The solution that Asimov offers is deeper and more convincing than that of the vast majority of philosophical treatises and moral teachings. His novel

contains a refutation of the famous principle “the result justifies the means”, which was used by the most terrible criminals in history.

Asimov does not dwell on the relatively elementary and obvious case for everyone when noble goals are hypocritically proclaimed to disguise the selfish interests of individuals or privileged strata. He is concerned with much more complex situations when people are sincerely convinced of the nobility of the goals they have set for themselves and when these goals are truly noble. At first glance, the Eternals in the novel set themselves only one goal – to improve reality and increase the amount of human happiness. They sincerely believe in it. However, it then turns out that the Eternals' intervention in the lives of people could be subconsciously dictated by the desire to perpetuate their dominance over humanity. And even Twissell, the Chairman of the Council of Time, shares with Harlan his doubts about that: “What if we, despite all our most honest and noble intentions, stopped the evolution of man because we were afraid to meet superhumans?” [1, 239]

The idea of time travel, embodied in the novel, allows the writer to pose the problem of “result and means” on the scale of human history as a whole. How do we know, in fact, what is the greatest good, the highest goal from the point of view of the entire human race? In the epilogue of the novel, Asimov puts into Noys' mouth his own thoughts about the place of humanity in the universe: “The highest good? And what is this? Who can answer this question? Your computers, your analyzers, your Cyberbrain?” [1, 242] The difficulty associated with answering these questions, according to Asimov, is, however, not in finding a formula for human happiness that is equally suitable for all times and peoples. Even if such a formula were found, it would turn out to be impossible to apply it. It is no coincidence that the entire future history of mankind, described in the novel, takes on the character of an endless repetition of already completed cycles. “Any system,” the author states, “which, like the Eternity, allows a group of people to make decisions for all of humanity to choose its future, inevitably leads to a dead end or repetition.” [1, 3] The best goal is therefore one that involves using the best and possibly more humane means to

achieve it. By forcing the reader to think about these problems, the novel thereby helps to realize that there are no and cannot be such goals that would justify in the eyes of humanity thermonuclear war, the dictatorship of a handful of oligarchs, armed intervention, the suppression of the democratic rights of the people, racial hatred and other social evils. Every person, albeit to a small extent, is a Harlan in his own way; it also depends on his decisions and actions whether the antagonistic social system with all its cataclysms and injustices will be perpetuated or not.

After reading “The End of Eternity,” the question arises: are the assumptions that the author makes the basis of the plot acceptable from a scientific point of view? The author of the article is inclined to answer this question in the negative. There are two weak points in the novel. One of them is a too free handling of the concept of “time” [7, 49], the other is related to the sociological concept of the author [4, 272].

In accordance with modern philosophical and physical ideas about the objective world, time and space are not absolute, but relative properties of moving matter [5, 8]. Despite all the relativity of time, it, however, has an extremely important objective characteristic inherent in it, namely, irreversibility. The irreversibility of time is not a postulate of this or that physical theory, but a cornerstone principle of scientific knowledge. Violation of this principle is tantamount to a rejection of scientific determinism, of causality, on which the entire edifice of science is based [6, 150]. As a scientist, Asimov is well aware of this and, in order not to mislead the reader, formulates on behalf of August Sennor, one of the characters in the novel, the insoluble scientific paradoxes that the hypothetical assumption of the reversibility of time entails.

Another, equally arbitrary assumption in the novel is the exaggeration of the role of chance in the development of society. Asimov, apparently, shares the very widespread opinion among the philosophers, sociologists and historians of the U.S. that the history of mankind depends entirely on a random combination of circumstances. In fact, it is precisely on this idea that the intervention of the Eternals in the fate of humanity described in the novel is built: to produce the Minimum

Necessary Impact in such a way that it entails the Maximum Expected Reaction. It turns out that “all it takes is to jam the clutch in your engine,” or ruin the brakes on a congressman’s car,” or even “move a box from one shelf to another” to make a sharp turn in the entire subsequent history of mankind. In order to be convinced of the untenability of the assumptions, it is enough to formulate several questions to which only one very definite answer can be given: if Gutenberg had not invented the printing font, would we still be copying all books by hand; if Columbus had not discovered America, would we still not have idea about its existence; if Watt, Faraday, and Diesel had not been born, would we still only be traveling on horses and living by candlelight? Of course – not. We are convinced of this by the simple and obvious fact that all great discoveries directly met the needs of their era, logically continued the general course of development and, as a rule, were made repeatedly and in parallel by different people.

To deny the epithet “science fiction” to “The End of Eternity” on the basis of certain arbitrary assumptions it contains would be the same as doubting the realism of a work of fiction only because its characters are fictitious persons. “The End of Eternity” is not a treatise on the properties of time and the role of chance in history, but a science fiction novel about the possible social consequences of scientific and technological progress. And without those hypothetical assumptions that the writer made, there would be neither an exciting novel, nor a timely warning about real dangers on the way to the great future of mankind.

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