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Ascent Toward the Ideal

The article discusses Ilyenkov's concept of the ideal and its phenomena. It attempts to reconstruct the authentic meaning assigned to this notion by the thinker himself as well as to map the directions of contemporary polemic concerning the concept of the ideal.

The category of the ideal forms the axis about which the thinking of E.V. Ilyenkov always turned. He regarded the ideal and its phenomena as the sole real object of philosophy. Philosophy is the science of ideas and of the ideal. It has no other object. Throughout his life, Ilyenkov investigated the category of the ideal, in its various hypostases—the forms of value, personality, and talent and of social ideals—and, of course, in its own logical form.

I

At the end of the 1950s, Ilyenkov, together with other associates of the Institute of Philosophy, was recruited to participate in the project of producing *The Philosophical Encyclopedia* [Filosofskaia entsiklopediia]. During preparation of the second volume, he was

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already performing the duties of a nonstaff editor of the section on dialectical materialism. Seven of his entries appeared in this volume; among them were “Ideal” [Ideal] (first part) and “The Ideal” [Ideal’noe].¹

In those days, it was customary to start discussions of the ideal with a ritual quotation from the Afterword to the second edition of Marx’s *Capital*: “The ideal is nothing but the material, transplanted into the human head and transformed in it.”²

This formula, of course, is redolent of radical materialism. The problem is how to understand this “transformation” (or, perhaps, “translation” [*perevod*]—*Übersetzung*) and, strange as it may sound, what “the human head” is. Ilyenkov insisted that the *human head* is an organ of *culture* and not of nature. The ideal does not lie concealed inside the skull. Besides the brain, anything created by man for man is its corporal appearance. All that falls within the sphere of human activity acquires the imprint of the ideal, becoming an abode and tool of the ideal for so long as the activity lasts.

Ilyenkov defined the ideal as “the presence of an external thing at the phase of its production in the activity of a subject.”³ It is a form of activity that copies the form of a thing, or it is the form of a thing that has become separate from this thing itself in the process of human activity. The ideal exists only at the very moment of conversion of the form of a thing into the form of activity and vice versa. As soon as human activity ceases, the ideal is also extinguished at the same instant.

The ideal is the subjective being of an object, its nonbeing in-itself and its being in and through the other. “It is that which does not exist and which at the same time exists. . . . It is being that, however, is equivalent to nonbeing.”⁴ There is a suitable term in Hegelian logic—*other-being* ([*inobytie*], *Anderssein*). Marx, describing the ideal form of value in *Capital*, used the Latin idiom *quid pro quo*—one in place of the other.

The forms of expression of the ideal are diverse, like nature itself. There is no thing in the world in whose natural body the ideal could not reside, and equally the nature of any thing can be expressed in ideal form. In this sense, the ideal is an infinite and eternal attribute of Nature. Words and numbers, money and moral

commandments, the categories of logic, and artistic images—all these are phenomena (or, if you will, modes) of ideal reality. All of them, together and separately, were investigated by Ilyenkov.

II

In 1968 there appeared in *Voprosy filosofii* (no. 8, pp. 125–35) an article by D.I. Dubrovskii titled “Brain and Psyche” [Mozg i psikhika], which attacked Ilyenkov’s theory of the ideal and the similar views of another philosopher—F.T. Mikhailov. Thus began a long-drawn-out polemic concerning the nature of the ideal, a polemic that continues to this day.

For Dubrovskii “the ideal” is an exact synonym for “the subjective”—a sort of psychic reality that, on the one hand, reflects the external, material world, and, on the other hand, is “informationally isomorphic” with states of the human brain.

In my view, David Bakhurst flatters Dubrovskii when he writes that “Dubrovsky’s idea of ‘subjective reality’ reproduces the principal features of the Cartesian conception of the I.”⁵ Descartes understood mind as a special thinking substance fundamentally different from material things and events, including states of the brain, while Dubrovskii considers thinking a function of “neurodynamic structures.” This is quite ordinary, not to say vulgar, materialism and empiricism, by comparison with which the Cartesian dualism of mind and body was an important step forward.

Just three months later, *Voprosy filosofii* published Ilyenkov’s response to Dubrovskii—“Psyche and Brain” [Psikhika i mozg].⁶ Here he does not touch on the concept of the ideal as such,⁷ preferring to dwell on such modes of the ideal as *personality*, *talent*, and *genius* and discuss to what extent the life activity of a person can be explained in terms of his psychophysiology and to what extent in terms of social circumstances and culture.

At this very time, Ilyenkov’s attention was wholly focused on the Zagorsk experiment with deaf-blind children.* He was trying

*This refers to A. Meshcheriakov’s experiment of teaching fifty deaf-blind children, who lived in Zagorsk’s children home.—Ed.

to grope experimentally for the moment when the ideal is born inside the not yet human, “natural” psyche, to glimpse with his own eyes the world’s most interesting mystery—the act of appearance of the human self. And then to understand the laws that govern the formation of the world of ideas and ideals within the child’s soul.

“Here there arises a unique opportunity to record with almost mathematical precision the real conditions required for the emergence of such phenomena as consciousness, self-consciousness, thinking, imagination, and esthetic and moral feeling. . . . The formative process of the specifically human features of the psyche is here stretched out in time, especially at the first—decisive—stages, and can therefore be examined under the ‘magnifying glass of time,’ as though with the aid of a slow-motion film sequence.”⁸

The general principle of formation of the human personality was extremely clear to Ilyenkov from the very start: inasmuch as the substance of the ideal is the material world of culture, the living body of the child must be connected with this world by means of activity. For the same purpose, the pedagogues of the Sokolianskii–Meshcheriakov school developed the method of “joint-divided activity” by the educator and the child. This activity is constructed “in such a way that the child should gradually adopt all those specifically human modes of conscious interaction with the environment that are materially embodied in the forms of things created by man for man.”⁹

Consciousness and will arise here in natural fashion as forms of orientation in the material world of culture, just as simple sensations (spatial images, sounds, smells, and tastes) serve to orient the living being in the external world of nature.

III

Ilyenkov summed up the results of his many years of research into the ideal and its phenomena in a bulky manuscript titled “Dialectic of the Ideal” [Dialektika ideal’nogo]. Here he defines the ideal as *the relationship between at least two different things, one of which adequately represents the essence of the other.*

In nature we encounter various kinds of relationships of rep-

resentation. But the representation is always of certain *external properties* of an object. Even feelings, this supreme form of natural representation, captures and retains no more than the external character of things.¹⁰

However, only a form of expression of the *essence* of things—that is, of the laws and causes of their being—has the right to be called “ideal.” Moreover, this expression must be pure and unconditionally adequate. Human activity or labor turns its object “inside out,” cleaving the flesh of its patent being and cleansing its essence of the dross of time in order to expose it in ideally pure form—*sub specie aeternitatis*.

In order that the expression of the essence of a thing should be ideally pure, the material for it must come from the natural body of some *other* thing. The thing entrusts its “soul” to another thing, and that other thing is made its *symbol*. Thus, a diplomat symbolically represents his country, money represents the value of all commodities, and words represent the meaning of various things within a culture.

The ideal is a representation *in and through the other*; moreover, it is always an *adequate* representation, and a representation of the very *essence* of things. As such, this essence is material. The ideal is merely the form of “other-being” conveyed to it by human activity. The ideal is the material, only turned *outward by its essence*.

Within consciousness this objective ideal form of human activity acquires *subjectivity*, turning toward itself and reflecting upon itself. “Consciousness, properly speaking, arises only where the individual is compelled to look at himself as though from the side, as though through the eyes of another person,” Ilyenkov remarks.¹¹ Temples and statues, books and drawings, computers and musical instruments, and above all the cerebral cortex become tools and “mirrors” by means of which is accomplished the reflection of the ideal form of activity-in-itself.

IV

The polemic concerning the concept of the ideal did not end with Ilyenkov’s death. The matter took quite a new turn after the

publication in 1984 of a manuscript by M.A. Lifshits.¹² Mikhail Aleksandrovich [Lifshits] belonged to the old, prewar generation of philosophers. He concerned himself mainly with esthetics, was an outstanding stylist, and had an encyclopedic cast of mind. Lifshits had been friendly with Ilyenkov from time immemorial, and it is not easy to understand why he started a “dialogue” about the ideal only after the death of his friend.

The chief point in his objections to Ilyenkov was that the ideal exists not only in the space of human activity but also beyond its bounds—within absolutely any thing: “The ideal is in everything.”

Lifshits defined “the ideal” as “certain limits to that which our sensory perceptions give us in experience. . . . Examples of such limits are an ideal gas, an ideal crystal—real abstractions that it is possible to approach, just as a polygon with an endlessly increasing number of sides approaches circularity. The entire structure of the universe . . . rests on norms or models that can be reached only through an endless series of successive approximations.”¹³

Properly speaking, it is these that are called “ideals” in ordinary discourse: a perfect model of something, an unattainable horizon toward which someone or something strives—without chance of success. This trivial conception of the ideal was elevated to the rank of a philosophical category by Kant,¹⁴ and Lifshits followed in his footsteps. The only difference is that Kant wisely warned against ascribing to abstract ideals a reality beyond “possible experience,” while Lifshits proclaimed them real “supports” of the universe.

What Ilyenkov called “the ideal” is something quite, quite different. Following Marx, he used the term “the ideal” to describe a special “sensory-suprasensory or social (*sinnlich übersinnliche oder gesellschaftliche*)” reality.¹⁵ This phenomenon of “representation,” of the replacement of one object by another through activity, of the “ideal positing” of self as other was of little interest to Lifshits.

Any dialogue or dispute has a purpose only if the sides are talking about the same object. Any disagreement presupposes a silent agreement—at least regarding the meaning of words. However, Lifshits starts his “dialogue” with Ilyenkov by changing the *meaning of a term*. His “ideal” bears as little resemblance to the “ideal”

of Ilyenkov as the constellation of the Dog bears to “man’s best friend.” Ilyenkov looks for ideal forms in real human activity, in object-oriented practical relationships among people, while Lifshits’s thinking hovers in a world of abstractions, admiring “ideal crystals.”

The “dialogue” that Lifshits starts with Ilyenkov therefore has no purpose. It was with equal success that the rabbis entered into a “dialogue” with Spinoza about God—assigning to the word “God” the biblical meaning to which they were accustomed, although this meaning was alien to the philosopher. Wishing to avoid such empty “dialogues,” Spinoza warned that “between faith, or Theology, and Philosophy there is no intercourse or kinship whatsoever.”¹⁶ Nor is there any kinship between the “ideal” of Ilyenkov and the “ideal” of Lifshits. The word is the same, but it denotes different things.

Nevertheless, over the past quarter century this pseudodialogue about the ideal has served as the theme for a mass of articles and for dozens of lectures at the Ilyenkov Readings. A book too has already come out.¹⁷

V

The most acute problem in the theory of the ideal is the problem of *adequate forms* of being of the ideal. Ilyenkov investigated the value form of commodity exchange as “the most typical and fundamental,” “purely ideal” form. A distinguishing characteristic of this form is utter indifference to its content. “This is a directly universal form, quite indifferent to any sensorially perceptible material of its ‘embodiment’ or ‘materialization.’ The form of value is absolutely independent of specific characteristics of the ‘natural body’ of that commodity into which it is ‘inserted’ and by which it is *represented*. . . . It always remains in some way distinct from any material, sensorially perceptible body of its ‘embodiment,’ from any corporeal reality.”¹⁸

This *logical* interpretation of the ideal appears to depart from the generally accepted use of the word and from the associated *esthetic* understanding of the ideal as something splendid, lofty, and perfect of its kind. Many people, reading the above lines, have

thought that Ilyenkov's "ideal" is a cold, abstract-logical construct that has lost any kinship with the principles of beauty and morality. Otherwise, how are we to explain that Ilyenkov selected as a model phenomenon of the ideal not a painter's canvas, book, or musical score but such a base thing as money?

In Marx's manuscripts we find a collection of the pejorative epithets bestowed on the monetary "form of value" by Sophocles, Goethe, and Shakespeare. The latter, incidentally, subtly captured the indifference to the nature of things that is characteristic of money when he called gold "the common whore of mankind."¹⁹

I.A. Raskin conducts a clever esthetic experiment by inviting us to "imagine the form of value as an artistic image."²⁰ That passage in "Dialectic of the Ideal" where Ilyenkov speaks of the utter indifference of value to its embodiments is characterized by Raskin as "a precise and complete description . . . of the Evil One, the Devil, Satan." This evil genius of mankind also assumes any guise that he wishes. It is not without reason that gold has been nicknamed "the yellow devil": the image of the "cunning" seducer shaped by Christian mythology and art is easily projected onto money.

It is worth noting here that not only the devil but also all the biblical angels possessed the ability to turn into anything they wished. For example, in the third chapter of Exodus an angel appeared to Moses in the image of a burning prickly bush. It is possible to cite a mass of examples of *positive* "formless" figures from ancient mythology: the reader will find a detailed list of them in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Let me at least mention Proteus, shepherd of seals—a faceless but wise and kind Greek deity.

On the other hand, far from always has gold been associated with devils and with girls of easy virtue. In referring to gold, the very same poets make frequent use of the loftiest figures of speech. It is even called "the noble metal," while the ideal era of the flourishing of the human race is called "the Golden Age." In his *Politeia*, Plato says that gold must predominate in the souls of philosopher kings.

Heraclitus drew a comparison between gold and the primordial and eternal cosmic fire out of which things come: "Everything is exchanged for fire and fire for everything, just as gold is exchanged

for goods and goods for gold” [B 90 DK]. Of course, Heraclitus has in mind not the chemical element Aurum but the *monetary form of value* that gold assumes. And the grandfather of dialectics measures this form of value up against the cosmic genesis of all that exists. It is as though he senses through the sensitive skin of his mind the universality of *logical* definitions of the “commodity–gold” relationship, the *ideal universality* of this form of market relations. And this was at a time when commodity–money relations were still very far from being *real* universality, when they could not yet turn into a “world classic.”

VI

Leaving allegories aside, it is possible to point to another “thing” that completely and unconditionally fits Ilyenkov’s description of the form of value. That is the *concept*. In the classical sense of this word, as a form of understanding of the nature of things. Once the mind has a concept at its disposal, that concept remains the same forever in any of its innumerable material guises—in letters and sounds, numbers and lines, neurons and electrons. Like money, the concept is able to change its external aspect with *devilish* ease and be in a thousand different places at one and the same time. For example, the concept of a house is present simultaneously in the head of the architect, in the design that he prepares, and in the stone “body” of the building that is constructed in accordance with this design.

And what intellectual seduction lies hidden in the concept! The Devil was well aware of this: he tempted the primogenitors of mankind with fruits from the tree of knowledge—with *concepts*: “Your eyes will open and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.” It is possible to get bored with anything except understanding—thus another connoisseur of human souls, Virgil, seconded the biblical serpent.

The concept is the ideal “in its own juice”; there is nothing more ideal. The concept clearly appears preferable to the form of value as a candidate for the title of “the most typical and fundamental,” “purely ideal” form. Unlike the concept, the form of value is not

a universal form of human activity. It acquires its universal character only under special historical conditions, and sooner or later it must therefore lose that character. The form of value was born in the process of commodity exchange, before that it did not exist, and it will inevitably vanish when market relations among people come to an end.

Nor, strictly speaking, is it a *purely* ideal form. For it does not have its own *ideal content*. The content of the value form is the *material* activity of man—labor, the living source of value, its “substance.”

In speaking of the ideal character of the value form, Marx clearly had in mind, as a logical model, Hegel’s *Begriffsbestimmung* (definition of a concept). We find a parallel between money and logical categories already in Marx’s early manuscripts: “Logic is the *money* of the spirit, the speculative *thought–value* of man and nature.”²¹ The categories of logic are similar to money in their abstract indifference to the individual peculiarities of the objects *represented* by them, to the “use value” of the latter.

For Lifshits and Raskin the true standard of the ideal is the *artistic image*. They also measure money by this yardstick, which is quite alien to its value nature. It is no surprise that for Lifshits money is “a material relationship” while for Raskin it is “a transformed form of the ideal.”

However, even if money is looked at through the lens of an *esthetic* definition of the ideal, as “perfect of its kind,” it passes the test for ideality without difficulty. It has only to be looked at *in its kind*—that is, strictly within the bounds of the world of commodities and exchange values that gave birth to it. In this space of the market, money is the *ideal* commodity, a splendid ideal at which all other commodities “cast wooing glances” (Marx). These Platonic-ideal glances cast at money by commodities are none other than *prices*. And gold was made the ideal money.²²

It is, of course, absurd to see in money an ideal of human relations *in general*. Money is ideal only *in its kind*: it has been and remains the optimal, purest, and highest of all possible forms of the expression of value—in other words, the *ideal* form in all senses of this word. But all the ideality of money vanishes as soon as we leave the

space of commodity relations—that is, those same relations whose essence is ideally (*ideale*—absolutely adequately) represented in the money form and whose ideal (*ideell*) aspect is money.

There is nothing ideal in money regarded abstractly, as an artistic image or moral regulator. It is ideal only as a form of *value*, not as a form of *sensibility*. Money is ideal as the *economic* category in which a concrete historical form of the division of labor and property is most adequately “represented.” From any other than the economic point of view, it appears that nothing of significance is represented in the money form of value. To the esthetic contemplation, money reveals a total, abstract in its purity nothingness, Hegel’s *das Nichts*. This is how money turns into the Devil—into “the image of formlessness” and “the face of facelessness” (Raskin).

VII

Which is the purest, which is “the most ideal” of the *universal* forms of the ideal activity of man? The concept, or the artistic image, or the rule of morality?

It is clear that these three “modes” of ideal being—the logical, the esthetic, and the moral—have been separated from one another by the power of abstraction, and that they cannot exist separately. Let us also agree that they are all subordinate to, merely ideal aspects of practical human activity, of the labor that transforms both the external world and man himself. Ilyenkov wrote outstandingly about this, so I shall not repeat it. This is not what we are discussing.

As the ideal is a form of representation of the nature of things, it is necessary to determine which of its modes makes it possible to represent the nature of things in the “most ideal” fashion. What shall we take as the standard of ideal reality: concepts, images, or values?

The concept possesses just one advantage over its rivals, but in the given context it is a decisive one. This advantage is *absolute freedom* in representing the nature of things, attained thanks to the “devilish” indifference of the concept to its other-being. Only one thing is required of the concept—that it should adequately express the essence of its object, in other words, that it should be true. And

the ideally plastic nature of the concept enables it to express this essence in any natural material whatsoever.

Neither artistic images nor moral norms can boast of such truly boundless freedom to express the nature of things. Their organic fusion with the sensory-material conditions of human activity is a sign of the lesser—by comparison with the concept—purity and “transparency” of the ideal other-being that they give to things. But right here lies *their* advantage over the logical form of the concept: the possibility of direct, sensory-concrete perception of the essence of the object. This is the ability—instilled by art and morality—to capture the very essence of a matter “integrally,” even before rational thinking begins. This is “intuition,” without which not a single new concept can be obtained.²³

Taken together, these three universal modes of the ideal, known to us under the names of Truth, Good, and Beauty, shape the human soul—the personality. The personality of man, like his organic body, is three-dimensional. In the personality we find the direct reality of the ideal—“reality” in the Hegelian sense, as revealed and apparent essence.

Notes

1. At the end of the 1950s, the writer Igor Zabelin, enthused with Vernadskii's cosmology of the “noosphere,” called on scientists to create a theory of the ideal—“idealology.” He understood the ideal as a property of nervous tissue. “In personal conversations,” Zabelin recalled, “I managed to persuade my friend, the philosopher E.V. Ilyenkov, to undertake a general philosophical elaboration of the problem of the ideal. As a result, the article ‘The Ideal’ was written for *The Philosophical Encyclopedia*” (I.M. Zabelin, *Chelovechestvo—dlia chego ono?* Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1970, Essay 2).

2. K. Marks [Marx] and F. Engel's [Engels], *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1955–1981), vol. 23, p. 21. “Das Ideelle nichts andres als das im Menschenkopf umgesetzte und übersetzte Materielle,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), vol. 23, p. 27.

3. “Ideal' noe,” in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1962), vol. 2, p. 222.

4. “Ideal' noe,” 1962.

5. D. Bakhurst, *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov* ([New York:] Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 240.

6. *Voprosy filosofii*, 1968, no. 11, pp. 145–55.

7. Not because he “considered Dubrovsky’s theory unworthy of serious refutation,” as Bakhurst supposes (Bakhurst, *Consciousness and Revolution*, p. 241). Ilyenkov engaged in serious polemic with the empiricist understanding of the ideal both in *The Philosophical Encyclopedia* and especially in “Dialectic of the Ideal” [Dialektika ideal’nogo], where substantial portion of his critique is aimed directly at Dubrovskii’s conception.

8. E.V. Il’enkov, “Psikhika cheloveka pod ‘lupoi vremeni’,” *Priroda*, 1970, no. 1, p. 89.

9. E.V. Il’enkov, “Stanovlenie lichnosti: k itogam nauchnogo eksperimenta,” *Kommunist*, 1977, no. 2, p. 74.

10. I am talking about organic sensibility, leaving aside here those *ideal* sensations of the human being which, in Marx’s words, have been made *by theorists*: “Die Sinne sind daher unmittelbar in ihrer Praxis *Theoretiker* geworden” (K. Marx, “Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844,” in *Werke*, Ergänzungsband Erster Teil, p. 540).

11. E.V. Il’enkov, “Dialektika ideal’nogo,” in the current publication [*Logos*].

12. Mikhail Lifshits, “Ob ideal’nom i real’nom,” *Voprosy filosofii*, 1984, no. 10, pp. 120–45.

13. Lifshits, “Ob ideal’nom,” p. 123.

14. “An ideal is for reason a prototype of all things that . . . while more or less approximating to it are nonetheless infinitely far from being comparable with it” (translated from Russian; I. Kant, *Sochineniia* [Moscow: Mysl’, 1964], vol. 3, p. 508).

15. See Marks and Engel’s, *Sochineniia*, vol. 23, p. 82; *Werke*, vol. 23, p. 86.

16. “Inter fidem, sive Theologiam, et Philosophiam nullum esse commercium, nullamve affinitatem” (*Tractatus theologico-politicus* [Hamburg: apud Henricum Kunraht, 1670], p. 165).

17. G.V. Lobastov, ed., *Ideal’noe: Il’enkov i Lifshits*, (Moscow: RGGU, 2004).

18. Il’enkov, “Dialektika ideal’nogo,” in the current publication [*Logos*].

19. *Timon of Athens*, Act IV, Scene III.

20. I.A. Raskin, “Razlichat’ dukhov (den’gi i khudozhestvennyi obraz),” in the current publication [*Logos*].

21. Marx, “Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844,” p. 156. “Die *Logik*—das *Geld* des Geistes, der spekulative, der *Gedankenwert* des Menschen und der Natur” (*Werke*, Ergänzungsband Erster Teil, p. 571).

22. “Ideelles Geld oder Wertmaß wurde das Gold” (*Das Kapital*, p. 123).

23. On this see E.V. Il’enkov, “Ob esteticheskoi prirode fantazii,” *Voprosy estetiki*, 1964, no. 6.