

What an Ideal Is

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Abstract What I intend to do in the following pages is to focus on what might be termed the most important turn in the very dimension of ideality throughout the history of Western culture: the introduction of the notion of ideal drawn from Plato's notion of idea, and especially its singular contemporary destiny. In the first part of the article, I am going to analyze Kant's introduction of the notion of ideal and Hegel's reading of it, and I am going to argue that the former affirms a dualistic relationship which the latter negates. In the second part of the article, I am going to reason on the actual effects of both the affirmation and the negation of the dualism between the ideal and the real, especially focusing on the forms of totalitarianism and anarchism which characterized the twentieth-century history of Western culture. This will lead me to argue that we should try to avoid both the bad uses of the ideal (namely, the idealization of the real and the debasement of the real through the ideal) and the death of the ideal (namely, forms of epistemological and ethical anarchism) in order to work on a notion of ideal which could be an exceedingly promising tool for us to change and improve the real. This change and improvement can be achieved through the affirmation of the dualistic relationship between the ideal and the real, and more specifically through what I will call an evolutionary notion of ideal versus a revolutionary notion of ideal.

Keywords Ideal · Dualism · Totalitarianism · Anarchism · Kant · Hegel

What do we exactly say when we say that Plato's philosophy founded the typical Western culture? If I were asked this question, I would answer that the most typical trait which Plato gave to Western culture was the dimension of ideality as the counterpart of the dimension of reality. What I intend to do in the following pages is to focus on what I might call the most important turn in the very dimension of ideality throughout the history of Western culture: the introduction of the notion of *ideal* drawn from Plato's notion of idea, and especially its singular contemporary destiny.

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It is Kant who philosophically distinguishes what an ideal is from what an idea is. Let us take into account, firstly, what is said in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and, secondly, what is said in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In the former, Kant introduces the notion of ideal by arguing that what distinguishes it from the notion of idea is a matter of distance from reality: «something that seems to be even further removed from objective reality than the idea is what I call the ideal, by which I understand the idea not merely *in concreto* but *in individuo*, i.e., as an individual thing which is determinable, or even determined, through the idea alone». ¹ Then, Kant provides an example of what an ideal is: «Virtue, and with it human wisdom in its entire purity, are ideas. But the sage (of the Stoics) is an ideal, i.e., a human being who exists merely in thoughts, but who is fully congruent with the idea of wisdom». ² Now, we might ask what the ideal (that is, «something that seems to be even further removed from objective reality than the idea») and something that «exists merely in thoughts») is for. The answer is given by Kant himself: «just as the idea gives the rule, so the ideal in such a case serves as the original image for the thoroughgoing determination of the copy», ³ that is, «we have in us no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine human being, with which we can compare ourselves, judging ourselves and thereby improving ourselves, even though we can never reach the standard». ⁴ This is a crucial result: an ideal is precisely what makes us capable of actually employing «the rule» given by the idea – an ideal is precisely the key of our actually «judging ourselves and thereby improving ourselves». More specifically, ideals «provide an indispensable standard for reason, which needs the concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, in order to assess and measure the degree and the defects of what is incomplete», ⁵ and what follows is our actual work on what we actually do, since ideals «have a practical power (as regulative principles) grounding the possibility of the perfection of certain actions». ⁶

It might seem odd that what Kant continuously remarks, and which seems to be the *condicio sine qua non* for the ideal to work, is its distance from reality. As we have already seen, the ideal is «something that seems to be even further removed from objective reality than the idea» and something that «exists merely in thoughts». Besides, Kant adds that «to try to realize the ideal in an example, i.e., in appearance, such as that of the sage in a novel, is not feasible, and even has about it something nonsensical and not very edifying, since the natural limits which constantly impair the completeness in the idea render impossible every illusion in such an attempt, and thereby render even what is good in the idea suspect». ⁷ Finally, Kant argues that «one may never concede them [the ideals] objective reality (existence)», ⁸ since things «always fall infinitely short of reaching» ⁹ them. Now, the question is why the distance of the ideal from reality is so essential. I think that the best answer to this question can

¹ I. Kant (2005), A 568/B 596.

² *Ibidem*, A 569/B 597.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, A 569/B 597-A 570/B 598.

⁶ *Ibidem*, A 569/B 597.

⁷ *Ibidem*, A 570/B 598.

⁸ *Ibidem*, A 569/B 597.

⁹ *Ibidem*, A 578/B 606.

be given by means of the comparison between what happens when there is this distance and what happens when this distance is not there, that is, by means of the comparison between Kant's and Hegel's notions of ideal. And, in order to draw this comparison, it is necessary to analyze what is said about the ideal in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, since the privileged field in which both Kant and Hegel test their notions of ideal is that of aesthetics.

Kant makes reference to the aesthetic dimension of the ideal also in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he argues, as we have already seen, that the ideal «serves as the original image». Besides, he specifies that being an «original image» means being a «*prototypon*»,¹⁰ which literally entails the etymological reference to what is a first or primitive form. The aesthetic dimension of the ideal is vigorously strengthened in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where Kant, after having defined the ideal as «the representation of an individual being as adequate to an idea»,¹¹ especially works on the ideal of beauty: «that archetype of taste, which indeed rests on reason's indeterminate idea of a maximum, but cannot be represented through concepts, but only in an individual presentation, would better be called the ideal of the beautiful, something that we strive to produce in ourselves even if we are not in possession of it. But it will be merely an ideal of the imagination, precisely because it does not rest on concepts but on presentation, and the faculty of presentation is the imagination». ¹² Now, let us carefully follow Kant's reasoning on the ideal of beauty, since it is extremely instructive about what an ideal is (both aesthetically and more extensively considered). Firstly, Kant specifies that the ideal of beauty is applicable if the idea of beauty to which it makes reference is «fixed by a concept of objective purposiveness, consequently it must not belong to the object of an entirely pure judgment of taste, but rather to one of a partly intellectualized judgment of taste». ¹³ Secondly, and consequently, Kant can argue that «Only that which has the end of its existence in itself, the human being, who determines his ends himself through reason, or, where he must derive them from external perception can nevertheless compare them to essential and universal ends and in that case also aesthetically judge their agreement with them: this human being alone is capable of an ideal of beauty». ¹⁴ The reason why this passage is extremely instructive is that it identifies the core of what an ideal is: *an ideal is an aesthetic image of an ethical purpose*. The very conceivableness of an ideal requires two conditions: the first is the «objective purposiveness», and more specifically «the end of its existence in itself», and the second is what founds the former, that is, «the human being, who determines his ends himself through reason» – *an ideal is what sheds light on an ethical purpose best*.

Kant focuses on both the aesthetic and the ethical dimensions of the ideal. As for the former, he explains that the ideal makes reference to «the aesthetic normal idea, which is an individual intuition (of the imagination) that represents the standard for judging it as a thing belonging to a particular species». ¹⁵ As for the latter, he explains that the ideal makes reference to «the idea of reason, which makes the ends of humanity insofar

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Id (2000), 5: 232.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 5: 232–5: 233.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 5: 233.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

as they cannot be sensibly represented into the principle for the judging of its figure, through which, as they effect in appearance, the former are revealed». ¹⁶ More specifically, «the aesthetic normal idea» is a construction of the imagination, which is able «to superimpose one image on another and by means of the congruence of several of the same kind to arrive at a mean that can serve them all as a common measure» ¹⁷ (for instance, «if in a similar way there is sought for this average man the average head, the average nose, etc., then this shape is the basis for the normal idea of the beautiful man in the country where this comparison is made» ¹⁸), whereas «the idea of reason» makes reference to «the expression of the moral, without which the object would not please universally and moreover positively (not merely negatively in an academically correct presentation)». ¹⁹ Therefore, what is actually essential is «The visible expression of moral ideas». ²⁰

The essential lesson drawn from Kant's philosophical work on the notion of ideal might be summarized in the following terms: *an ideal is an exceedingly powerful model for us to improve our reality*. The reason why it is an exceedingly powerful model is given by its aesthetic dimension (it is a «visible expression»). And the reason why it makes us improve our reality is given by its ethical dimension (it is a «visible expression of moral ideas», which means that an ideal is an exceedingly powerful model for us to actually «judg[e] ourselves and thereby improv[e] ourselves»). Finally, equally essential to the way in which an ideal can work as an exceedingly powerful model for us to improve our reality is the distance between the former, which is what is ideal, and the latter, which is what is real – it seems that *what is ideal can work as an exceedingly powerful model for us to improve what is real if the former is distinguished from the latter*.

Hegel is the philosopher who suppresses the division between the ideal and the real. And this suppression is what I might call the most important turn in the very dimension of ideality throughout the history of Western culture.

Let us start by focusing on Hegel's aesthetics, which is both the field he chooses in order to develop his notion of ideal and the perfect standpoint for us to compare Kant's and Hegel's notions of ideal. Hegel reflects on the aesthetic notion of ideal, which is the ideal of beauty, especially in his *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art* (but some remarks on the same topic are expressed also in his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*). Let us focus on what happens to the notion of ideal in Hegel's *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Hegel introduces the notion of ideal by claiming that it must be distinguished from the notion of idea precisely because the former can be embodied by something real in a way in which the latter cannot: «the Idea as the beauty of art is not the Idea as such, in the way that a metaphysical logic has to apprehend it as the Absolute, but the Idea as shaped forward into reality and as having advanced to immediate unity and correspondence with this reality». ²¹ More specifically, «the Idea as the *beauty of art* is the Idea with the nearer qualification of being both essentially individual reality and also an individual configuration of reality destined essentially to

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 5: 234.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 5: 235.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Hegel (1975), *Introduction*, 8, i.

embody and reveal the Idea»²²: «Taken thus, the Idea as reality, shaped in accordance with the Concept of the Idea, is the *Ideal*».²³ At this stage, Hegel is ready to express the core of what the ideal means in terms of the relationship between the dimension of ideality and the dimension of reality: «Accordingly there is here expressed the demand that the Idea and its configuration as a concrete reality shall be made completely adequate to one another».²⁴ This claim is crucial: here, Hegel expresses the kind of tension which characterizes the relationship between the dimension of ideality and the dimension of reality not only in aesthetic terms, but in general terms. Namely, Hegel claims that the former tends to be «completely» embodied into the latter. Hegel's aesthetics is a privileged field in which, by means of the ideal, it is sensitively perspicuous what generally happens, or better, must happen, according to his philosophy: the dimension of ideality must tend to be «completely» embodied into the dimension of reality (and the Kantian distance of the former from the latter is suppressed).

Before continuing to reason on the more general meaning of the convergence between ideality and reality, let us keep considering Hegel's aesthetics, namely, his notion of aesthetic ideal. As we have already seen, Hegel's aesthetic ideal is a real work of art. But what work of art? Hegel claims: «It is one thing for the artist simply to imitate the face of the sitter, its surface and external form, confronting him in repose, and quite another to be able to portray the true features which express the inmost soul of the subject. For it is throughout necessary for the Ideal that the outer form should explicitly correspond with the soul».²⁵ An artefact which is not an ideal is, for instance, the following: «what has become the fashion, namely what are called tableaux vivants, imitate famous masterpieces deliberately and agreeably, and the accessories, costume, etc., they reproduce accurately; but often enough we see ordinary faces substituted for the spiritual expression of the subjects and this produces an inappropriate effect».²⁶ Whereas an artefact which is an ideal is, for instance, the following: «Raphael's Madonnas, on the other hand, show us forms of expression, cheeks, eyes, nose, mouth, which, as forms, are appropriate to the radiance, joy, piety, and also the humility of a mother's love»,²⁷ which leads to the conclusion that «the nature of the artistic Ideal is to be sought in this reconveyance of external existence into the spiritual realm, so that the external appearance, by being adequate to the spirit, is the revelation thereof».²⁸ Therefore, the dimension of ideality which must tend to be «completely» embodied into the dimension of reality is that of «the inmost soul», «the radiance, joy, piety, and also the humility», «the spiritual realm», and «the spirit». The acme is precisely what Hegel calls «the spiritual realm» and «the spirit»: the ideal is the «complete» embodiment of «the spirit» into the real.

Let us follow another example given by Hegel, in order to better understand what happens to the notion of ideal in his philosophy, which determines the contemporary destiny of the relationship between ideality and reality. Hegel adds that «the supreme purity of the Ideal will here too be able to consist only in the fact that the gods, Christ, Apostles, saints, penitents, and the devout are set before us in their blessed repose and

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem*, III, A, 1.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

satisfaction; therein they are untouched by the world with the distress and exigency of its manifold complications, struggles, and oppositions».²⁹ More specifically, «This self-sufficiency is not indeed lacking in particular character, but the particularization which is dispersed in the sphere of the external and the finite is purified here into simple determinacy, so that the traces of an external influence and relation appear altogether expunged».³⁰ Finally, «Therefore, if the gods are represented as involved also in mundane affairs, they must still retain their eternal and inviolable majesty. For Jupiter, Juno, Apollo, Mars, for example, are indeed determinate but fixed authorities and powers which preserve their own independent freedom».³¹ Now, let us make a simple trial. If we consider the key features of Hegel's example, then we obtain the description of what happens not only aesthetically, but generally, according to his philosophy. The relationship between the ideal and the real entails that the former must tend to be «completely» embodied into the latter, that is, by being «untouched by the world with the distress and exigency of its manifold complications, struggles, and oppositions», by being «purified here into simple determinacy, so that the traces of an external influence and relation appear altogether expunged», and by «still retain[ing] [...] [the] eternal and inviolable majesty» possessed by the ideals, which continue to be «fixed authorities and powers which preserve their own independent freedom». The analogy between the Hegelian destiny of the ideal and the Hegelian phenomenology of the general relationship between «the spirit» (or better, «the [S]pirit») and the real is extremely clear. Hegel's notion of ideal makes perspicuous what happens if there is no distance of ideality in general from reality in general: the former must tend to «completely» suppress «the distress and exigency of [...] [the] manifold complications, struggles, and oppositions» of the latter, «so that the traces of an external influence and relation appear altogether expunged» and it is «still retain[ed] [...] [the] eternal and inviolable majesty» of «fixed authorities and powers».

There is another Kantian and Hegelian instructive aesthetic issue in which it is extremely clear what happens depending on whether there is, or there is not, a distance between ideality and reality: the notion of symbol. According to both Kant's and Hegel's aesthetics, a symbol is a piece of reality, as it were, which makes reference to a piece of ideality, as it were. In other words, a symbol is a form (for instance, the work of art X) which makes reference to a content (for instance, to the idea Y). Again, according to both Kant's and Hegel's aesthetics, a symbol cannot achieve a perfect correspondence between the former and the latter, namely, the work of art X cannot perfectly correspond to the idea Y. But there is an exceedingly meaningful difference between Kant's and Hegel's notions of symbol: Kant believes that the absence of a perfect correspondence is virtuous, whereas Hegel believes that the absence of a perfect correspondence is vicious. That is, the former gives the distance between the two dimensions a positive meaning, whereas the latter gives the distance between the two dimensions a negative meaning.

Let us start by briefly considering Kant's stance. I might synthesize it in the following terms: if we are contemplating the work of art X, which is the symbol of the idea Y, then we have the disadvantage of not being capable of finding the perfect, and ultimate, correspondence between X and Y. We have however the advantage,

²⁹ *Ibidem*, III, B, 3.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

which is more precious than the disadvantage, of infinitely thinking about the possible relationship between X and Y, and, by infinitely thinking, we take into account other possible relationships between X and other possible ideas, and this is an extremely important result in terms of the remarkableness of both the ideas we think about and the exercises of our thinking itself. In other terms, this is the reason why a work of art can be a precious means which enlightens ideas throughout the whole courses of our lives: what makes us infinitely think is precisely the absence of a perfect correspondence between the form of the work of art and its content. If we try to solve $2+2$, then we get to its perfect, and ultimate, answer 4 in a second. This is a remarkable result, but a human being should seek another remarkable result. That is, if we try to solve the meaning of the work of art X, then, precisely because we cannot get to its perfect, and ultimate, answer in a second, we infinitely think (about the idea Y, but also about other ideas).

Now, let us briefly consider Hegel's stance. I might synthesize it in the following terms: if we are contemplating the work of art X, which is the symbol of the idea Y, then we have the disadvantage of not being capable of finding the perfect, and ultimate, correspondence between X and Y, and we do not have any advantage at all. Hegel claims, for instance, that the Egyptian works of art, which are symbols, are imperfect precisely because their forms do not «completely» correspond to their contents.

Therefore, Kant's and Hegel's aesthetics provide us with at least two remarkable arguments which help us to answer the following question: what kind of relationship between the dimension of ideality (extensively considered) and the dimension of reality (extensively considered) should we pursue, and why? Kant seems to affirm the most typical trait which Plato gave to Western culture. That is, *there is, and indeed there should be, what I might call a dualistic relationship between ideality and reality*. And, as for the reason why this dualism should be there, I might try to synthesize Kant's stance in the following terms, at least from an epistemological point of view: *thinking is more important than knowing – the ideal* (and, more extensively, the dimension of ideality) *works at its best for us when it is not embodied into our reality, and our view is not «complete»* (otherwise, we have «something nonsensical and not very edifying», namely, something that «render[s] even what is good in the idea suspect»). Hegel, instead, seems to negate the most typical trait which Plato gave to Western culture. That is, *there is not, and indeed there should not be, what I might call a dualistic relationship between ideality and reality*. And, as for the reason why this dualism should not be there, I might try to synthesize Hegel's stance in the following terms, at least from an epistemological point of view: *knowing is more important than thinking – the ideal* (and, more extensively, the dimension of ideality) *works at its best for us when it is embodied into our reality, and our view is «complete»* (otherwise, we do not have what «is throughout necessary for the Ideal», namely, «that the outer form should explicitly correspond with the soul» in order to be «the revelation» of «the spirit»).

Now, the question to be answered is the following: what does the suppression of the dualism between ideality and reality precisely mean? That is, what does the turn in the relationship between ideality and reality precisely mean for the contemporary history of Western culture?

Berlin provides us with a promising clue by reminding us that Herzen wrote that a new form of human sacrifice had arisen in his time, namely, the sacrifice of living human beings on the altars of abstractions – nation, church, party, class, progress, the

forces of history: these have all been invoked in his day and in ours. If these demand the slaughter of living human beings, then they must be satisfied.³²

What I am going to do is to argue that what Berlin (that is, Herzen) calls abstractions are precisely *ideals*, or more specifically, something that works as *Hegelian ideals*: an abstraction which stops being divided from the real, *an abstraction which starts being the real*.

To all appearances, an ideal which starts being the real is nothing but the successful result of the human pursuit of the improvement of human reality. That is, for instance, I have the ideal of spiritual progress, and, to all appearances, my pursuit of my ideal entails the improvement of my reality, and even of your reality. But let us go further. What does it happen to me if:

1. I believe that my ideal can be made real, or better, must be made real for my own good, and even for your own good;
2. my pursuit of my ideal runs into an obstacle (namely, we live in the same community, we vote to decide what style of life to adopt, and the style of life which you, as the majority, decide to adopt is opposite to my ideal of spiritual progress)?

I might answer by saying that I have at least two choices:

1. I could try to persuade you to decide to adopt the style of life which is the embodiment of my ideal of spiritual progress;
2. I could try to suppress you.

The first choice might seem both the most reasonable and the most probable. But, as for its reasonableness, I should say that persuasion too frequently becomes manipulation when the persuader believes that his ideal can be made real, or better, must be made real for his own good, and even for your own good. And, as for its probability, I should say that the post-Hegelian Western history has too frequently proved that, if it is believed that an ideal can be made real, or better, must be made real for the good of human beings, then the first choice is not probable at all. And this leads us to the second choice, which is actually, and tragically, one of the most typical traits of the post-Hegelian Western history.

That is, *believing that an ideal can be made real, or better, must be made real for the good of human beings means (can too frequently mean) being totalitarian*. And this is the reason why it is crucial for us to work on the relationship between ideality and reality: it is too dangerous for us to have a Hegelian notion of ideal, but it is equally dangerous for us not to have a notion of ideal at all.

Let us go back to the above-mentioned example. What does it happen to me if I give up my ideal of spiritual progress? I might synthesize my answer by means of the word “anarchist”: I would become an “anarchist” in the etymological sense of the term, which means, by making reference to the ancient Greek word *anarkhia*, “rulerlessness”. That is, I would become “rulerlessness” because I would lose what

³² See Berlin (1988) and Herzen (1956).

works as a “ruler” to me: my ideal. Being an “anarchist” means, in its etymological sense, being a human being who lives without ideals whatsoever.

Should I not better choose to be an anarchist as an antidote to what is even more dangerous, that is, a totalitarian? The answer is negative, and I am going to try to argue why. Again, let us go back to the above-mentioned example:

1. firstly, I give up my ideal of spiritual progress and, secondly, I give up my ideals whatsoever;
2. when we vote to decide what style of life to adopt, I do not vote at all, since, *à la* Feyerabend, anything goes for me: my epistemological, and consequently ethical, anarchism leads me to consider any ideal equivalent in terms of truth and value. That is, any ideal has no truth (or nothing more than a radically relativistic truth) and no value (or nothing more than a radically relativistic value). Therefore, it is not worth pursuing any ideal whatsoever. And I am actually not pursuing any ideal whatsoever, both epistemologically and ethically.

Apparently, being an anarchist is better than being a totalitarian, since the latter too frequently causes dangerous, and even tragic, persuasions and suppressions which the former does not seem to cause. But let us go further. Let us imagine that, when we voted, you, as the majority, decided to adopt a style of life according to which capital punishment is legal (even if the history of our community witnessed, at least once, the case of a man who was judged innocent by means of evidence which became available 20 years after he was judged guilty: capital punishment was not legal at that time, so it was possible to correct the error, and save his life). What does my anarchism mean if this is the case? I might answer by saying that the meaning of my anarchism is actually the following: I behave, both epistemologically and ethically, as a human being who is actually responsible for the possible death of another possible innocent man who is erroneously judged guilty. Deciding not to vote at all means deciding to leave anything to a destiny, even tragic, which I could have changed – *being an anarchist, that is, having no ideals whatsoever, means leaving the human reality to a possible tragic destiny which I could have changed.*

In other words, epistemological and ethical anarchism is not a particularly developed form of freedom according to which the absence of ideals whatsoever is the successful outcome of a radical relativism which entails that, if both my style of life and your style of life do not make reference to ideals whatsoever, then both my style of life (whatever it may be) and your style of life (whatever it may be) are legal, being equivalent in terms of truth and value. On the contrary, epistemological and ethical anarchism seems to decrease freedom, because giving up ideals means giving up what is maybe our best means by which we can achieve the following crucial things:

1. we can *actually compare* our styles of life *before voting* (thanks to the strength given by my ideal, I can *actually argue* its reasons before you and, thanks to the strength given by your ideal, you can *actually argue* its reasons before me). That is, we can *actually compare* my ideal of spiritual progress and your ideal of capital punishment *before voting*;
2. that is, we give us the possibility of *actually changing* our initial standpoints *before voting*. And this is the reason why epistemological and ethical anarchism is not a

particularly developed form of freedom: I can *actually* be *freer* if I can have at my disposal more standpoints among which to choose, and not only my initial one, and you can *actually* be *freer* if you can have at your disposal more standpoints among which to choose, and not only your initial one – *freedom is a matter of increasing the number of choices which are actually at our disposal, and not a matter of decreasing their number by making our initial standpoints our ultimate choices, that is, our ultimate actions.*

At this stage, an instructive analogy between totalitarianism and anarchism is quite perspicuous: they both lead to stagnation – both totalitarianism and anarchism work against the passage from a *status quo* X to a *status in fieri* Y, that is, *both totalitarianism and anarchism work against the very possibility of improving.* As for the former, the case is that of human beings who think and act by being led by an ideal which must be made real: the reality of the ideal is the ultimate *status quo* which is imagined, and consequently pursued. As for the latter, the case is that of human beings who think and act by not being led by an ideal: the reality which, by chance, is my *status quo* (the place in which I was born, its cultural, social, juridical, and economical traits) is very likely not to change at all for the rest of my life, and consequently not to improve at all for the rest of my life, because I am very likely to be incapable of, firstly, thinking of another (and maybe better) *status in fieri* and, secondly, acting in consequence.

Ideals are crucial precisely if we are capable of using them as powerful tools not to stagnate, but to change, and possibly to improve, our own reality. Through a metaphor, I might say that we should use ideals as a horizon line. What is the horizon line for, if the case is that of a human being standing before it? Apparently, the horizon line is useless: if the human being thinks he can get to it (as a totalitarian, out of the metaphor), then he will act too much (therefore, badly: overestimating his power on reality), and, if the human being thinks he cannot get to it (as an anarchist, out of the metaphor), then he will act too less (therefore, badly: underestimating his power on reality). But the horizon line can be exceedingly useful. Indeed, it is precisely what can make the human being walk, by providing him with a challenging orientation – out of the metaphor, *ideals are precisely what can make us change and improve by providing us with a challenging purpose*, which can always be challenging, that is, which can always make us change and improve, *precisely by being always unattainable* (like a horizon line, which is necessarily unattainable, because the more the human being walks towards it, the more it gets away from him).

It is clear that the notion of ideal has an aesthetic genesis (which is very helpful to understand this notion), but a destiny which is extremely more extensive: the aesthetic meaning of the notion of ideal clarifies a structural mechanism which profoundly characterizes both the ground fields of Western epistemology and ethics, and consequently the applied fields of Western politics, law, and economy. Now, the question is why the distance of the ideal from reality is so essential, especially considering what happened throughout the twentieth-century history of Western culture.

I might start by arguing that, if we read the twentieth-century history of Western culture through the notion of ideal, then we get to the following diagnosis:

1. firstly, as an outcome of the nineteenth-century turn of the notion of ideal, from being what Kant divides from reality to being what Hegel fuses with reality,

- Western culture, and especially European culture as its historical core, seems to optimistically experience what I might call *the will of making the ideal real*, from the far-right regimes to the far-left regimes;
2. secondly, as an outcome of the progressive collapse of the will of making the ideal real, a will characterized by what may have been the most tragic wars in human history, Western culture seems to experience what I might call the most pessimistic epistemological and ethical attitude. This is *the will of making the ideal dead*, as several philosophical stances have proved since the second half of the twentieth century, from forms of epistemological and ethical anarchism to forms of radical relativism, irrealism, and coherentism, which all work on the collapse of both the epistemological notion of truth and the ethical notion of good (also including, interestingly enough, the aesthetic notion of beauty).

I might synthesize this diagnosis by shedding light on an instructive structure. If the diagnosis I proposed is correct, then I might argue that what happened throughout the twentieth-century history of Western culture is the following: as Western men and women, we tended to give up the ideal *tout court* instead of giving up its bad uses, while preserving its exceedingly promising advantages for us (I might even say, through a prosaic metaphor, that we tended to throw out the baby with the bathwater).

The bad uses of the ideal experienced throughout the history of Western culture are at least two. As for the first, it is what I have already called totalitarianism, which might be described, from a logical point of view, as *the idealization of the real*: if we imagine to have two polarities, the first being the ideal and the second being the real, then the idealization of the real means that the latter is supposed to assume the ontological status of the former. As for the second, it might be described, from a logical point of view, as *the debasement of the real through the ideal*: if we imagine to have two polarities, the first being the ideal and the second being the real, then the debasement of the real through the ideal means that the ontological status of the real is supposed to be the worst possible, since the unattainability of the ideal is (wrongly) supposed to work as a sort of condemnation of the real (several Neo-Platonic readings of the Christian religion seem to be founded on this structural mechanism), instead of being (rightly) supposed to work as a sort of powerful tool for changing and improving the real.

Therefore, once again, what seems to be crucial for us is to avoid both the bad uses of the ideal (namely, the idealization of the real and the debasement of the real through the ideal) and the death of the ideal (namely, epistemological and ethical anarchism, radical relativism, irrealism, and coherentism) in order to work on a notion of ideal which could be exceedingly promising, since it could powerfully make us change and improve the real – *the ideal could be our powerful tool for the valorisation, and not the debasement, of the real*.

But how could we achieve this result? It is already clear that the standpoint I would propose is the Kantian distance of the ideal from the real. But, more precisely, why and how? I begin from the second part of the question (how?) in order to try to be more precise, then, about the first part of the question (why?). I might start arguing that we should assume *an evolutionary notion of ideal* versus *a revolutionary notion of ideal*.

Let us start by analyzing the meaning of the second notion. Speaking about a revolutionary notion of ideal entails the following two standpoints:

1. *an ontological account of the notion of ideal*: the ideal is supposed to have an ontological status on its own, which is different from the ontological status of the real, namely, the former is characterized by completeness, perfection, invariability, universality, and so forth and the latter is characterized by incompleteness, imperfection, variability, particularity, and so forth;
2. *an extension of the ontological status of the ideal to the ontological status of the real*: the substitution of the incomplete, imperfect, variable, and particular ontological status of the real with the complete, perfect, invariable, and universal ontological status of the real is supposed to be both possible and pursuable.

Therefore, the ideal induces, here, what I might call a *revolution*: the ultimate outcome of the ideal is a revolutionary change of the real, which, from a logical point of view, is supposed to pass from its own status to the opposite one (namely, from incompleteness, imperfection, variability, and particularity to completeness, perfection, invariability, and universality). It is important to notice that the first standpoint is not the actual cause of this process: the revolution described is actually caused by the second standpoint. If the former is not followed by the latter, then no revolution is possible. That is, an ontological account of the notion of ideal is not dangerous in itself.

Now, let us analyze the meaning of the evolutionary notion of ideal, which entails the following two standpoints:

1. *an epistemological account of the notion of ideal*: the ideal is supposed to have an epistemological function, which is the power of making us imagine what is different from the real, in order to better understand what the real is, and especially what the real might actually be (through a metaphor, once we imagine the distance between the ideal and the real, we can focus on a point between them, even if this point is nearer to the real: out of the metaphor, this point is what the real might actually be);
2. *a work on the improvement of the real*: once we have imagined, by means of the ideal, what the real might actually be, we can work on it. That is, we can work on the actual improvement of the real, since what we are going to work on is not the (logically impossible) substitution of its own ontological status, but the (logically possible) improvement of an ontological status which, while continuing to be incomplete, imperfect, variable, and particular, might be better anyway.

Therefore, the ideal induces, here, what I might call an *evolution*: the ultimate outcome of the ideal is an evolutionary change of the real, which, from a logical point of view, is supposed to pass from its own status to an analogous one, which is better anyway – *the ultimate outcome of the ideal is an evolution of the very identity of the real*: by means of the ideal, we can, firstly, better understand the very identity of the real and, secondly, *make it evolve by actually respecting what it is already*.

Therefore, speaking of an evolutionary notion of ideal versus a revolutionary notion of ideal means speaking of *our capability of understanding and respecting what is already there, making it evolve in terms of making its identity evolve towards the best possible fulfilment of what it already is*.

And, again, the distance between the ideal and the real is essential – *the dualistic relationship between the ideal and the real is essential* because it is the *condicio sine*

qua non of the respect for the identity of the real and, together with it, for *who we already are*, that is, identities to take to their evolution (or improvement of their own unique traits), and not to their revolution (or suppression of their own unique traits).

Now, I have answered also to the first part of the question I have asked (why the Kantian distance of the ideal from the real is the necessary standpoint in order to achieve the result of making the ideal our powerful tool for the valorisation, and not the debasement, of the real). But it is possible to strengthen this result by making reference to the actual inventor of the dualistic relationship between the dimension of ideality (extensively considered) and the dimension of reality (extensively considered): Plato, who already understood that, if their relationship is dualistic, then the former can be used precisely for the valorisation, and not the debasement, of the latter. Plato's philosophy is complex, and the kind of relationship he outlines between ideality and reality is not devoid of questions.³³ But there are at least some remarkable references to the possible use of the dimension of ideality for the valorisation, and not the debasement, of the dimension of reality. Plato writes in his *Republic*:

“In the present case, then, let us take any multiplicity you please; for example, there are many couches and tables”. “Of course”. “But these utensils imply, I suppose, only two ideas or forms, one of a couch and one of a table”. “Yes”. “And are we not also in the habit of saying that the craftsman who produces either of them fixes his eyes on the idea or form, and so makes in the one case the couches and in the other the tables that we use, and similarly of other things? For surely no craftsman makes the idea itself. How could he?”. “By no means”.³⁴

These words are remarkable because, starting from them, Plato argues an analogy between «the craftsman» and the Demiurge. Therefore, it is even more remarkable what Plato writes about the working method of «the craftsman»: he «fixes his eyes on the idea or form, and so makes in the one case the couches and in the other the tables that we use». That is, he uses the dimension of ideality («the idea or form», which is, again, complete, perfect, invariable, and universal) in order to improve the dimension of reality («in the one case the couches and in the other the tables that we use», which are, again, incomplete, imperfect, variable, and particular) – *Plato already understood that ideality is maybe our most powerful tool to make our reality change and improve*: in other words, «the craftsman» «fixes his eyes on the idea or form» because what is dualistically distant from the real «couches and tables» is his most powerful tool to realize what the real «couches and tables» actually are, and especially what the real «couches and tables» might actually be. If «the craftsman» does not make reference to «the idea or form», then, quoting the words I have already used, the «couches and tables» which, by chance, are his *status quo* (the «couches and tables» typical of the place in which he was born) are very likely not to change at all for the rest of his life (he is very likely to make for the rest of his life «couches and tables» identical to those typical of the place in which he was born), and consequently not to improve at all for the rest of his life, because he is very likely to be incapable of, firstly, thinking of other (and maybe better) «couches and tables» and, secondly, of acting in consequence.

³³ See at least Ross (1951), but also Trabattoni (1998).

³⁴ Plato (1969), 596 a-b.

Therefore, as Western men and women, we have at least two excellent chances at our disposal in order to relearn how to promisingly use what I might continue to call the ideal as maybe our most powerful tool to make our reality change and improve: Kant's philosophy, which teaches us that the ideal is the model which sheds light on an ethical purpose best, and Plato's philosophy, which, beyond founding Kant's philosophy, teaches us that ideality is what makes us pass from a worse contingent reality to a better contingent reality – and this is an outstanding result, whose *condicio sine qua non* is the dualistic relationship between ideality and reality: if we respect it, then we can use the former to benefit the latter.

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