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CLASSICAL AND MODERN UNDERSTANDING
OF THE TERM "IDEAL"

SUMMARY. The current use of the term "ideal" shows that a casual meaning of this word has been blurred. It has been moving closer to the notion of a target, a premier choice. In the traditional sense the ideal is treated as something difficult to achieve and rare. The author suggests that the ideal had those particular features in order to create a sacred fund of some cultural meanings. The practice of placement of ideals into remote transcendent areas is chronologically connected to a transfer from the mythological to religious view of the world. In contradiction to K. Jaspers, the author does not agree that this transfer appeared as a result of comprehension of self-impotence. On the contrary, perfection and generosity of life involve a necessity to preserve the most important cultural achievements in the form of remote ideals. Nevertheless, since the modern age the humanity has rejected to accumulate the ideal and to protect it from accidental historical cataclysms. In this sense the modern times can be described as the life with no ideals or an open project for the future.

KEY WORDS. Ideal, perfect image, supreme goal of ambitions, inaccessibility, desacralization, protectability.

Studying the phenomenon of existence of human ideals, we can see a definite trend of modernity. Although the concept of "ideal" is used to mean a "perfect specimen" as well as "the supreme goal of aspirations," they have lost some unattainable height, perhaps due to the desacralisation of ideals. Anyway, the use of the word indicates it quite convincingly: "Ideally, we should finish the work tomorrow," "The team was saved by the ideal performance of our other couple", "It was an ideal crime, it has not been solved yet". We come across such expressions everywhere. The term "ideal" is also actively used in scientific discourse: we can, for example, read about the "ideals of the Sixtiers" (meaning not only their presence, adequate comprehension and verbalization, but, perhaps, "the struggle for ideals", i.e. to some extent, an "ideal" and a practical, achievable goal merge in one's mind). Moreover, modern consciousness probably finds it quite difficult to understand the most important condition necessary for understanding the meaning of the term: this condition is that the ideal is actually inaccessible. For an individual being it can be still possible to imagine the tragic discrepancy between one's own mode of action or one's own qualities and ideal ones (supposing a person clearly understands that it he is not capable of a heroic deed needed in these circumstances and performed by someone else), how-

ever, ideals surely have socio-individual nature. Private events and patterns (of objects, roles, existential choices, concepts) become well-known symbols and play an educational role for the next generation, often having already lost their authorship and historical certainty. So how and why can the society set unattainable goals for their representatives? Why are unachievable patterns needed? The naive psychological explanation ("in order to appreciate more what is almost impossible to achieve") is absolutely contrary to the logic of the usual way of human behavior. If you manage to find examples of deliberate complication of activity, it always has a hint of punishment (say, disciplinary) or exercise (for example, in resignation). But in the vast majority of ordinary situations a person saves his efforts both mental and physical.

"Appreciated more" is just the fixation of the side effect emerged due to the fact that the process of achieving a goal has been difficult (but was not intended to be). Eventually, if a goal has required extraordinary efforts we can even hate it or lose interest in it. However, the motive of an inaccessible ideal often tragically sounded in the art of previous epochs.

Probably if an ideal was considered inaccessible or almost inaccessible, it was for a reason. And that goal was obviously beyond the usual selection of the best, otherwise the sphere of the ideal would have represented continuous Olympics or a beauty contest, where favorites would have constantly changed (that is what we can observe now). This principle — of an inaccessible ideal — is clearly seen in the scheme of Plato, who postulated the impossibility of complete assimilation to eidoses, because in that case the world would have begun to double [1; 671]. But in the world of eidoses the uniqueness of every ideal was fatally fixed and unchangeable. This is also a certain simplification of efforts (accordingly, simplification of the worldview). In other models, an array of ideals is not registered and is not closed, for example, it is easy to imagine an ideal state, similar to what was founded by Utopus (by Sir Thomas More) or imagine the City of the Sun, generally similar to the City described by Tommaso Campanella. The ideal brotherhood of the Round Table of King Arthur included the First Knight (Lancelot), God's Knight (Galahad) and the Knight-faithful friend (Dinadan), and many other very original heroes who represented ideal personalized human qualities in a number of legends.

We cannot say that the ideal is inaccessible because in real life nothing similar is observed. On the contrary, the desire for idealization captures more extensive areas of human existence. With the development of exact sciences (and later technology) the image of the ideal enriched. One may recall the Eleatic with their ideal being-sphere, Pythagoreans with their relation to the number and ideal proportions, the ancient concept of beauty in general, the golden section (which, in general, can be demonstrated with the help of architectural objects). In the axiological sphere a person operates ethical categories more and more subtly, more and more boldly draws the collision of ethically controversial choices. Nevertheless, the ideal seems to hide all the time — in the archaic character of the Age of Antiquity, in the Golden Age, in an immense geographical distance, in a speculative area, in art. And even in a work of art, if we assume that it is not a reflection of the inaccessible, but an independent object having partly "grasped" the ideal, the ideal dies out and encapsulates with the

death of its creator, and being copied, does not possess the same value as the original in the eyes of the viewer. It is almost impossible to achieve it (to comprehend it to the same extent as the creator, to grasp, to acquire, to assign it). Even the most stable objects that have been considered ideal within any culture are not positioned as reachable: for example, in Japan the practice of contemplation of natural phenomena (cherry blossom) is traditionally pervaded with the inescapable feeling of sadness for the passing beauty. Cherries blossom every year and every year marks the renewal of the world and feelings, but the cultural tradition prescribes the tragic experience of this moment. It is necessary to compose a song about the fact how a sakura exfoliates (or is about to exfoliate) — as if such a season will never reoccur.

It seems that the ideal can be achieved only by not setting such a goal rationally. Various mystical practices postulate it directly (a person unobtrusively finds his Tao [2], by inertia, as a result of a good life, enters nirvana, etc.). But even highly regulated teachings sometimes show the same truth: Master Kong gives the name of a "noble man" not to the most diligent student of his, but a random person, who "respects the dignity" [3; 234]. Just as unexpectedly the ideal essence of the characters in Western cultures is recognized: Homer's Odyssey is called "equal to God," but he does compete with gods for this title, and vice versa, any attempt to "storm the heavens" in ancient Greek myths leads to cruel punishment. The ideal seems to involve decent people — people of ideal beauty (Ganymede) or ideal behavior, more rarely this happens with artifacts (for example, some relics miraculously hide from unworthy eyes). The ideal is not necessarily imperishable itself, but as it acquires imperishable meaning and status, making it even more difficult to achieve since there is a latent feeling of the need of an arbitrator who must correlate a real thing with this timeless standard. Recognition of new ideals resembles the canonization of saints: it is carried out with caution, with retardation, often after death exempts them from usage.

It is tempting to explain the transcendence of the ideal by the influence of religions, especially mature ones, having an expanded notion of the afterlife. Mythological consciousness virtually does not separate sacred domain from the secular one, the spirit world is closely adjacent to the living world. Religious consciousness, on the contrary, knows this clear division and complicates the procedure of communication with the sacred. Moreover, the sacred world is endowed with special qualities; it is not similar to habitual existence and often indescribable. K. Jaspers explains the emergence of a qualitatively new vision of the world in China, India and the West in the "Axial Age" by the increased level of reflection: "The new thing emerged in this epoch in the three above mentioned cultures is that a human is aware of existence in general, of himself and his boundaries. He faces the horror of the world and his own helplessness. Standing over the abyss, he raises radical questions, calls for liberation and salvation. Aware of his limitations, he sets himself higher goals, perceives the Absolute in the depths of his consciousness and in the clarity of the transcendental world"[4; 33]. But the religious relaxation cannot predominate over the mythological one: a myth is much more understandable, anthropomorphic, familiar than any of the tenets of a developed religion. That is, the "horror of the world" and awareness of the "helplessness" can contribute neither to the notion of the universal law of life nor to the belief in one god, nor, at last, to setting some "higher goals". An example of this is Ancient Egypt, invariably having survived the chaos between the dynastic periods. It did not come to any qualitative

leap in the understanding of transcendence of otherworldly being, although no one would say that death issues received little attention in this culture. On the contrary, an attempt to introduce monotheism under Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) failed, but in the same epoch, in the Middle Kingdom, democratization began to take shape in contacts with the higher powers: expensive mastabas were replaced by rock-cut tombs, any Egyptian who died, not just Pharaoh began to be identified with Osiris, a permission of Pharaoh was not needed for embalming and burial and an obligatory participation of priests was not needed for addressing gods [5; 185]. Most likely, the situation of "standing over the abyss" and reflection development was quite well known to Egyptians, but religion (or myth –there are no concurrent views what Egyptian beliefs were) responded by simplification of the ritual rather than abstraction experience; by approaching ways for salvation, not mystically hiding them. Priestly and political struggle led to the elevation of a cult (with absolute absorption of "subjugated" deities), but not to the unification of ruling the sacred world.

Another version seems much more plausible: the transition from myth to religion (with concomitant changes in the vision of the afterlife realm, its inaccessibility, differential reward, etc.) does not come from awareness of one's own weakness, but rather as a result of illustration of one's own power. Evolution of mythological concepts may look like this: animism — totemism — a cultural hero figure — God [6; 102]. According to T. Borko , a man with mythological consciousness cannot be aware of the possibility for innovations, which he has personally found. He always needs their consecration by a higher power: first, by an animal patron, then by a shaman, who is likened to an animal (in the ritual he performs a transition from human to natural state), after that by a chosen man (hero), not necessarily sacred, finally it is enough to delegate the consecration function directly to a god or gods (who are rather remote): "a man, through the rite and initiation constantly testifies that he is not a stranger, he is an insider" [6;103]. He himself is able to make the alien world mastered without intimidation, and an external higher power only makes this mastering legal. We see a much more complex scheme than just linking economic or political structure with changing a belief system and centralization of the church.

Thus, chronologically sacred world becomes a consolidation of power; it becomes estranged, complicated when a person begins to feel confident in his earthly fate, and not when he is aware of the fragility of his existence and his limitations. Savagery provides a lower degree of assurance for him than subsequent periods. Therefore, it should be asked why the use of such polarity of the sacred and profane is needed, if not for the daily support of a man in his practice. None of the world's religions gives an individual such freedom of manipulation (by magic, fetishes, witchcraft) with higher powers, as mythological consciousness did. None of the scenarios of life after death has been as risky as in the later religions: in fact, neither a Muslim, nor a Christian, nor a Taoist, nor a Buddhist, or a Jewish can say anything certain about their "afterlife", they can only hope for mercy from god or for a "positive balance" developed by the faceless world law. Hence, the value of the distance of the sacred consists not in personal benefits of individuals. Maybe we should not determine the crucial inaccessibility of ideals by powerful influence of religions, but, on the contrary, we should consider later religions to be a refuge of what the mankind has chosen as ideals.

Indeed, the sacred world, hidden from accidental glances, incorruptible, eternal, seems a perfect reservoir of what a person believes to be a perfect example, a perfect sense of their activities. At some historical point (we may call it "Axial Age" or not) humanity realizes its spiritual wealth. At the same time large historical memory includes facts of destruction of entire cultures (associated with the death of states, for example, the Roman Empire or ancient Sumer). Perhaps it would be more natural to try to imagine a kind of a refuge for the most valuable (ideals) in order to protect them from various historical vicissitudes. Plato puts eidoses into some speculative place "behind the ridge of the sky," and we see the same operation in different cultural contexts: the kingdom of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, karma (like a suitcase with individual savings) in Hinduism and Buddhism, Tao in Taoism and Confucianism are real reservoirs of the right, good, ideal, properly transformed, changed into God's grace — but partly preserved by the tradition in their original meaning. Everything disturbing the ideal from remaining intact and secure is separated and removed: the doctrine of heaven and hell is born, bad karma makes one lose a dangerous human form (animals and lower life forms do not create meanings), aberrance from Tao disrupts the harmony of the cosmos, but it cannot hurt the Tao itself — it is invisible and elusive.

Ideals, therefore, are considered as some kind of "reserve stock" of culture, protected from devaluation, criticism, oblivion and revaluation. They define a certain performance height, but do not encourage slavish imitation (this very imitation in other historical coordinates can depreciate the ideal and make it vulnerable to criticism: Don Quixote is ridiculous, and Don Juan is disgusting, if the first is considered outside the context of medieval chivalry, and the second — without opposing the Inquisition). Therefore, the classical notion of an ideal can be called a "perfect pattern" without any scale and without explanation how to correspond to this pattern, "the supreme goal of aspirations" without reference to those who pursue it. Ideals are a cultural foundation, showing what the humanity has been able to achieve in reality or in the speculative sphere. Until modern times and even before the middle of the 20th century a human lived in the binary system of coordinates: things in existence and due things, the due were represented by ideals. Serious attitude to the ideals (to such an extent that an ironic attitude to them is treated as blasphemy) shows again that preservation of the due was considered to be a vital condition for the existence of a culture. The loss of ideals was synonymous with falling of civilizations into barbarity that was felt intuitively and absolutely correctly: the procedure of ideals preservation is a sign of "prosperity" of the culture, its escaping from the mythological form of perceiving the world, i.e. an indicator of certain progress.

Going back to where the discourse started, we can see that the increase in ways of storing information in the most realistic form (no matter for whose eyes and inside what information flows) deprives the problem of ideals fixation and their preservation of its acuteness. The sacred world has lost one of its most important functions: it emptied when it became understood only as "eternal life," "afterlife" of individuals.

Careless attitude toward standards changes, both aesthetic and ethical, is largely predetermined by the illusion of reversibility. Ideals that are no longer considered as

detached from us in time and space supposedly can be revitalized at any time. However, it often turns out that the ideals artificially revived with the help of preserved marks and signs do not have an affective impact, do not agitate and do not force to choose them as the supreme goal of aspiration (e.g., sudden crisis of "the national idea" cannot be explained by lack of models, ideals). Having stopped to be the result of collective efforts, cultural consensus, ideals become common concepts, equivalent to other concepts, and in individual biographies any ideal is regarded as a strategic objective, which could or could not be achieved by an individual. A failure, in fact, negates the ideal itself, reducing it to the level of "mere fantasies."

Therefore, a common "diagnosis" of the present time — "absence of ideals" — is true to some extent. The meaning in which the ideal was understood and perceived before has disappeared or almost disappeared. This is not a "lack of spirituality" of modernity (it is static and, in general, unscientific characterization) or its decline (it is dynamic characterization, for example, according to H. Taine, "The air of mature civilizations is unfavorable for an ideal personality: it (ideal personality) is appropriate for epic and purely folk literature when inexperience and ignorance still give complete freedom to imagination" [7; 301]. A similar thought can be observed in O. Spengler's works [8; 102-103]). Rather, modernity is coming into another phase of existence, existence within estimated norms and rhizome-like future scenarios. This trend can be perceived tragically: "In the age of individualism, people believe in earthly life and refuse to believe in heaven; they believe in the quality of life rather than in its holiness, no one wants to be told how he should live... Well, it appears that after a millennium and a half paganism is coming back to us" [9; 73-74]. On the contrary, the absence of uniform and preserved ideals can be seen as an unprecedented degree of freedom, and the "total lack of structure of everyday life" [10; 597] can be seen as surpassable expenses. In any case, return to the old ideals perception at this stage seems to be unhelpful.

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