Dialectics of the Ideal
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The thought of the ideal passing into the real is profound: very important for history. But also in the personal life of man it is clear that this contains much truth. Against vulgar materialism.

The ‘ideal’ – or the ‘ideality’ of phenomena – is too important a category to be handled thoughtlessly and carelessly, as it is associated not only with a Marxist understanding of the essence of idealism, but even with its naming.

Among idealistic doctrines we include all those concepts in philosophy, which take as their starting point of an explanation of history and knowledge a conception of the ideal that is, as it were, partial, unelaborated – as consciousness or will, as thought or as the mind in general, as ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, as ‘feeling’ or as ‘creativity’ or as ‘socially-organised experience’.

This is precisely why the anti-materialist camp in philosophy is called idealism, and not, say, ‘intellectualism’ or ‘psychologism’, ‘voluntarism’ or ‘consciousness-ism’ [сознанизмом] – these are already particular specifications, and not the universal [всеобщее] attributes of idealism at all, regardless of the particular form it

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2. The Russian term ‘всеобщие’, which is translated as ‘universal’ in his 1974 article, ‘The Universal’, carries a literal meaning – as ‘common to all’ – that may be lost for the English reader. This secondary meaning is significant for Ilyenkov, who underscores this point: ‘In the literal sense of the word ‘всеобщее’ (universal) means ‘общее вsem’ (common to all)’; Ilyenkov 2009, p. 225. – A.L.
assumes. The ‘ideal’ here is understood in its entirety, as a complete totality of possible interpretations – those already known, and those yet to be invented.

Therefore, we must state that consciousness, for example, is ‘ideal’, or belongs to the category of ‘ideal’ phenomena, and in no case, in no sense or respect, to the material. But if one says, on the contrary, that the ‘ideal’ is consciousness (mental image, concept, etc.), then one introduces unacceptable confusion into the expression of the fundamental differences (contrasts) between the ideal and the material in general, into the very concept of the ‘ideal’. For such an inversion transforms the concept of the ideal from a thought-out theoretical designation of a well-known category of phenomena, into a name for only a few of them. As a result, one always risks getting into a fix: sooner or later a new, as yet unknown, variant of idealism will inevitably fall into one’s field of vision that does not fit into one’s overly narrow definition of the ‘ideal’, which cannot accommodate the special case. Where would one assign this new type of idealism? To materialism. Nowhere else. Or else one would have to change one’s understanding of the ‘ideal’ and ‘idealism’, to tinker with it to avoid obvious inconsistencies.

Ivan is a person, but a person is not Ivan. This is why under no circumstances is it permissible to define a general category through a description of one, albeit typical, case of ‘ideality’.

Bread is food – this is beyond doubt. But even elementary school logic does not permit the inversion of this truism, as the phrase ‘food is bread’ is not a correct definition of ‘food’, and can only appear correct to one who has never tried any food other than bread.

This is why one must define the category of the ‘ideal’ in its universal form, rather than through reference to its particular varieties, just like the concept of ‘matter’ is not disclosed through enumerating currently known conceptions of ‘matter’ in the natural sciences.

Incidentally, this method of reasoning about the ‘ideal’ can be found at every step. Too often the concept of the ‘ideal’ is understood as a simple (almost unnecessary) synonym for other phenomena, namely those that are determined theoretically through an understanding of the ‘ideal’ in philosophy, most commonly, the phenomenon of consciousness – consciousness in itself.

Here is a typical illustration of such an understanding [~ inversion of the truth – E.I.]: ‘Ideal phenomena cannot exist beyond and outside of consciousness, and all other phenomena of matter are material’.3

‘Beyond and outside of consciousness’ there exist, however, such phenomena as unconscious (‘subconscious’) motives of conscious activity. Remaining faithful to elementary logic, our author would have to take them to the level of material