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Idea: From Realism to Idealism

Among the many disputes still taking place in philosophy today, there is one particularly important one. It is the dispute: realism or idealism? As Étienne Gilson points out, in everyday life every normal person behaves like a realist and thinks he or she is a realist (including philosophers).¹ However, at the level of philosophical reflection, the problem begins to get complicated, and idealists are on the increase.²

In a strictly philosophical sense, there may even be more adherents of idealism than realists, although much depends, of course, on how one understands realism and how one understands idealism.

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¹“The first step on the road to realism is to realize that one has always been a realist. The second is to perceive that whatever one does to think differently, one will never succeed. The third step is the observation that those who maintain that they think differently think like realists as soon as they forget their assumed role.” Étienne Gilson, *Realizm tomistyczny* [Thomistic Realism], trans. by a committee (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy pax, 1968), 52.

²“All the objections of the idealist against the realist are formulated in idealist terms. What wonder, then, that the idealist always wins.” Gilson, *Realizm tomistyczny*, 52.



The prevailing belief is that idealism as a philosophical direction appeared in ancient Greece. Its creator was said to be Plato. But almost at the same time there appeared an opposition current to idealism, which was realism, whose creator in turn was Plato's disciple, Aristotle. Just as Aristotle's dispute with Plato and later Aristotelianism with Platonism continues to this day, so too does the dispute between realism and idealism. However, the latter dispute takes different forms and shapes. This article will be about exploring the origins of the dispute with a reasonable degree of precision, including the root meaning of the words present in it.

Let the starting point for our considerations be the terminological issues related to the words and concepts that arise in relation to realism and idealism.

The terms "idealism" and "realism," look ancient, or more precisely, the first one looks Greek (with the noun *idéa* at its root), and the second one looks Latin (adjective *realis*, *reale*). Both words have the ending "ism" (Greek: *izmós*). From the grammatical point of view, this ending is supposed to create a new noun, changing an adjective, if necessary. But here comes the first surprise: although the ending *izmós* is of Greek origin and sounds ancient, neologisms built with it in mind appeared only in modern times, beginning in the 17th century, when the fashion for neologisms, including neologisms with the ending "ism," took off.³ This fashion continues. In 2015, the ending "ism" was considered the "word of the year" because so many new words were created with it.⁴ It is to be expected, then, that both "realism" and "ide-

³ The word "neologism" itself was coined in 18th-century French. Cf. *Etymonline.com – Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed May 6th, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=neologism&type=0>. This fashion continues particularly in the area of specialized vocabulary.

⁴ "The suffix 'ism' is Merriam-Webster's word of the year for 2015," accessed March 2nd, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/word-of-the-year-2015>.

alism,” as words that appeared late, did so late enough that they will not be fully dependable in terms of explaining the origins of the dispute. To some extent, however, they must be taken into account, only at a deeper level than the Greek or Latin words.

The term “realism” does not appear until the late 18th century as an English word, followed by *réalisme* in French and *Realismus* in German.⁵ The stem of the word in each language is identical, and the ending is only slightly modified due to the rules for creating complex neologisms in a given language. Earlier, even as late as the 15th century, “real” had a legal meaning, still referring to the Roman tradition: “real” meant belonging to the order of things (*rei*) and not persons (*personae*). Another meaning, already from the 16th century, is that of something that is what its name indicates. A real one is the one that belongs (can be attributed) to a thing. In the oldest linguistic perspective (that of the *Vedas*), “real” meant immense wealth (*ram*).⁶

In the case of Polish, “real” (*realny*) comes from Latin *res*, and from Polish *rzec* (to say) and *rzecz* (a thing).⁷ There is a moral tinge present here, not a philosophical one. A realist is a real, or reliable, person.⁸ But *rzecz* (a thing) also derives from *rzec* (to say a word, to speak up).⁹ This way, realism is something that involves the phenomenon of human speech, something that can be said. We are certainly not deal-

⁵ *Etymonline.com*, accessed May 6th, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/realism#etymonline_v_7330.

⁶ Charles T. Onions, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 743.

⁷ Aleksander Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* [Dictionary of Polish Etymology], 4th ed. (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1985). 474.

⁸ Samuel B. Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego* [Dictionary of the Polish Language], vol. 5 (Warszawa: Gutenberg-Print, 1995), 34. Today, however, a realist in the everyday parlance is someone who is able to “get along” with another person on an issue that is not very clear (*res improba*) despite his moral reservations.

⁹ Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego*, 186.

ing here with an abstract and theoretical meaning that would characterize a philosophical stance. Rather, it is the moral meaning that gains precedence (a real man is a man who is transparent and therefore sincere).¹⁰

The word “idealism” just like the word “realism” is also a neologism. It appears at the end of the 18th century. It shares a common ending with realism, but its root is Greek, as it comes from the word *idéa*. Idealism is a reference to the meanings contained in the word *idéa* in the historical sense (the Ancient Greek language), the theological sense (Christianity), and the philosophical sense. The meanings of the word *idéa*, as well as new words based on its modifications, have spread more widely than has the similar legacy of the word *realis*.

Here are some examples of the colloquial meanings of the word “idea” and then the word “real” in today’s dominant European languages. The wealth of meanings is exceptionally large and can be found in publicly available online dictionaries.

The German language retains the word “idea” (*Idee*), which can mean a thought (*Gedanke*, *Einfall*), a representation (*Vorstellung*), a plan (*Plan*), an intention (*Absicht*), a basic thought (*Grundgedanke*), a guiding thought (*Leitgedanke*), or a principle (*Prinzip*). These meanings are mainly related to the human way of thinking, not to any separate reality.

In English, “idea” can mean a calculable plan, thought or practical suggestion, an individual impression, some verifiable opinion, one’s personal feeling, a goal or intention, an understanding, and a concept.

In the case of Spanish, *la idea* has many and even a great many meanings. The most basic and obvious is the act of understanding something, followed by the image or representation of an object that reaches our mind. An idea is also the purely rational apprehension by

¹⁰ Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego*, 34, 195.

human reason of innate ideas. It is also the plan necessary to produce something, the thought of doing something, someone's notion of something, and, more specifically, an idea to produce something that requires the ability to have the means and creativity to do so. The term pertains also to convictions, beliefs, and opinions. It means also a creative concept, an infatuation with an idea. There are a great many meanings of the word "idea" in Spanish, including those that refer to Greek and Christian traditions.

In Italian, *idea* appears in the broadest range, in as many as fifteen semantic areas. It can be any result of thought activity, any concept processed by the intellect and any representation of thought in the real or abstract order. It can also be an idea in the philosophical sense as discussed by Plato, Descartes and Kant. Next, an idea is a preliminary outline of something; a blueprint of something possible but not yet real; a way of cognizing something properly; an ideology and its varieties in terms of disputes in the social and political fields; a concept or effect of human thought; ideas as concepts nourished by man; a project of something to be constructed or put into practice; ingenuity or inspiration; a creative idea, especially in art; the beginning of such an idea and the design for its development; a minimal beginning from which a larger whole can be developed; an initial phenomenon that will gradually take full shape. All in all, the Italian language has the largest number of terms referring to the word "idea," certainly more than a hundred. This is likely due to the great influence of Greek culture and language on Italian Latin culture.

But in Italian, in addition to the various meanings of the word "idea" that refer to this word, it is important to pay attention to words that point to "idea" already in their core. These are terms such as *ideabile*, *ideale*, *idealismo*, *idealista*, *idealisticamente*, *idealistico*, *idealità*.

When it comes to the meanings of the word "idea" in modern Greek, there are several, although it is not clear what the common key

to them would be. *Ιδέα* is a concept (*έννοια*), a plan (*σχέδιο*), a general idea (*γενική ιδέα*), perception and perceptive apprehension, realization (*αντίληψη*), theory (*θεωρία*), opinion (*γνώμη*), approach, beginning of an idea, a conception (*σύλληψη*), a scene, a view worth beholding (*θέα*), point of view (*άποψη*), appearance, look (*όψη*), and spirit, soul, mind (*φρόνημα*). These meanings revolve around cognition in its various dimensions.

As far as the Polish language is concerned, the following meanings of the word *idea* appear (it is spelled like the English term, but pronounced like the Greek one): a guiding thought that determines the purpose and direction of action, a scientific or artistic creation, but also a view, pattern or attitude typical of an era, culture or group of people; a self-sustained, ideal being, eternal and unchanging; an impression of the human mind, constituting the object of cognition; a metaphysical concept that is not supported by any sense experience (Kantianism). The adjective *idealnie* (“ideally”) means “in a perfect manner, devoid of any flaw.” Synonyms for the word *idea* are: *ideal* (an ideal), *plan* (a plan), *pomysł* (an idea that is a project of doing something), and *mania*.

As is evident, the range of meanings of the word “idea” is very large in modern languages. It is difficult to point to any dominant meaning, much less any logical sequence of meanings. But the multiplicity of meanings also testifies to the vitality of Ancient Greek, both at the level of specialized terminology and in everyday language. This will make it all the more interesting to examine the appearance of the word “idea” in both colloquial and poetic language, as already featured in Homer’s works. The next step would be to move on to philosophical language—and at that point, we will be faced with a powerful dispute, for the understanding of which semantics is not enough, but it will be necessary to enter the works of philosophers, to enter the area of the systems they created. Only then will we also see what the never-ending philosophical dispute is about, the chief question of which is: realism or idealism?

Against the background of the analyzed terminological material related to the presence of the word “idea” in modern languages, a few more observations and conclusions about Ancient Greek are necessary. The word in question has its Indo-European root, present in its various daughter languages. This root (invariant stem) is “id,” which we recognize in words expanded by some prefix or suffix. The word *idéa* contains the suffix “ea.” The word *eidos*, on the other hand, contains the prefix “e” and the suffix “os.” Thus, the key to understanding the original sense of the word “idea” and words close to it is to recognize the sense of the “id” stem. Now, we find this stem in many languages derived from Proto-Indo-European, including Slavic languages such as Polish. In Latin, for example, this stem is present in the word *v[id]eo*, which means “I see.” The Polish *w[id]zę* (“I see”) also contains this stem, which can be more clearly recognized in the Polish adjective *w[id]ny* (“clear to see”). After discarding the prefix or suffix, we arrive, as it were, at the source of the meaning of the word *idéa*—it is “seeing.” And seeing is one of the most basic yet complex human functions. First of all, it concerns seeing through the sense of sight. This is the level of sensory cognition. So the word *idéa* is related to seeing as a way of perceiving. The ability to perceive through sight is something so distinctive and important to humans that the entire Indo-European language group has the same root in various words referring to vision. But at this stage, the meaning of the word *idéa* has still nothing to do with idealism.

In Homer’s works we encounter the word *ideai*, from which the *Homeric Dictionary* redirects us to the word *éido* as more basic and more frequent in Ancient Greek than the word *idéa*.¹¹ *Eído* means “to see,” as well as “to look.” It is the latter word (*eidos*) that appears more

¹¹ Cf. Georg Autenrieth, Robert P. Keep and Isaac Flagg, *A Homeric dictionary for schools and colleges* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895), 86, accessed May 6th, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/homericdictionar00auteiala/page/86/mode/2up>.

frequently in Homer. This will also be the case in the history of these words covering the works of Plato and Aristotle. *Eidos* will overtake *idéa*, and only then will *idéa* overtake *eidos*.

At the initial stage, of course, there was no analysis of the structure and meaning of these words (and its derivatives) among the Greeks themselves, but there was its wide usage, from which various conclusions can be drawn.

Seeing is an act of man: man sees, and the emphasis here is on the action, while the appearance lies with the object, because it is the seen object that looks like this or that. What remains open, however, is the problem of the relationship between seeing and the knowledge that arises from seeing. The former relates to the level of sensory cognition, while the latter is already a higher level of cognition, as it includes knowledge. These are just a few suggestions that need to be taken into account when studying various aspects of the word *idea* and words related to it at the pre-philosophical and (therefore) pre-idealistic stage.

In view of this, let us try to collect examples of the use of the word *idéa* and its close relative *eidos* in the works of various authors representing different areas of Greek literary culture, but still excluding Plato as regards the meaning he gave to this word in the technical sense, i.e. within his philosophical system.

Although Plato gave new meanings to the words *idéa* and *eidos* found in Ancient Greek, meanings drawn from everyday language and literature were still present throughout his work. They oscillated around the human vision, emphasizing its object, the process itself, or the type of vision. The concept of knowledge also appeared, but still in the colloquial sense. This was not yet Platonism as a philosophical system, as idealism. Platonism did not appear as a continuation of the colloquial and literary understanding of the words in the *idéa* and *eidos* group.

In view of this, what are the meanings of the words *eidos* and *idéa* that we encounter among non-philosophers? Did they influence, and if

so, to what extent did they have an impact on the formation of philosophical meaning? Did Platonic meaning begin only with Plato? Did the transition into Platonic meaning happen gradually, or was it sudden? From what was the new meaning generated?

The word *idéa* and those close to it, such as *eidōs* or *morphé*, did not, in their initial phase as words of the Ancient Greek language, have connections with idealism, especially a connection of the kind that we associate with Plato's philosophy. They were words referring to sense cognition and to that which was material. And since both sense cognition and materiality have many aspects, these words also have many meanings. This, in turn, makes translators from Ancient Greek into other European languages very often turn to synonyms that more precisely convey the meaning of one of the words mentioned here. Then, however, the reader who does not use an Ancient Greek source does not realize that behind some English or Polish word is a word of Greek origin, a word as strong as *idéa* or *eidōs*.

The strictly idealistic meaning did not appear until Plato, although it was only just crystallizing, with traditional, non-idealistic meanings occurring in parallel and in a wide variety. The words *eidōs* and *idéa* carried meanings that were quite loose, with no original meaning as already semantically established—but they shared a common reference through the root “id,” which refers to the function of seeing and its object. As we have already pointed out, the original and the strongest meaning of the words *eidōs* and *idéa* may be the root “id.” This is an Indo-European stem, hence we recognize it in Latin (*video*) or in Slavic languages, including Polish (*widac*). This is not surprising, since in a language family such as the group of Indo-European languages, there must have been common words, including such fundamental ones as the term for seeing and that which is seen.

The words *eidōs* and *idéa* have a basic connection with seeing (*ideín*). The word *morphé*, on the other hand, has an objective meaning; its relationship to seeing is omitted in the lexical form: it is all

about what is seen, not about seeing. What is seen and seeing can be pushed to the background or focused on exclusively. Not idealism but seeing is the primary source of the meaning of the word *idéa* or *eidos*. And what do we see in seeing? We see a view, different kinds of views, not an idea in the abstract sense.

In view of this, the problem arises, how did the transition from what is visually seen to an intellectual apprehension occur? How did the transition from view to idea come about? Latin has adopted the Greek word *idéa*, but not very eagerly. It appears in Cicero and Seneca.¹² But more common than *idéa* was its Latin translation as *species*. Because *species* comes exactly from what the word *idéa* comes from. If *idea* means seeing from *idein* (“to see”), then *species* also means seeing from *specere* (“to see”).¹³ The primitive source here is the root “spek,” which means observation, and is more concrete and not abstract.¹⁴ More abstract in the Polish sense would be the word *spekulacja* (“speculation”). Unfortunately, we associate the Latin word *species* with the concept of species, to which the English word refers (as part of systematization and hierarchization), where in biology we distinguish between species and genera. Only that English *species* and Polish *gatunek* do not indicate their relationship to the species having its ori-

¹² *Słownik łacińsko-polski* [Latin-Polish Dictionary], ed. Marian Plezia, vol. 3 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1998), 11.

¹³ “They called it *idéa* in Greek, a name already used by Plato; but we can well define it by the word *species*” (*hanc illi idéav appellabant, iam a Platone ita nominatam, nos recte speciem possumus dicere*—Cicero, *Academica*, I, 30). Quoted after Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pisma filozoficzne* [Philosophical Writings], vol. 3: *Księgi akademickie, O najwyższym dobru i zlu, Paradoxy stoików, Rozmowy tuskulańskie* [Academica, On the Ends of Good and Evil, Stoic Paradoxes, Tusculan Disputations], trans. Wiktor Kornatowski and Józef Śmigaj, commentary by Kazimierz Leśniak (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961).

¹⁴ *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Boston–New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 82.

gin in viewing. While originally *idéa* directed a Greek speaker toward seeing or the object of seeing, rather than abstract considerations, *species* already directed a Latin speaker toward abstracting from that seeing. Interestingly, that is not the case with Polish speakers, because the Polish for species (*gatunek*) redirects to a fully abstract concept of species taken from the German language (*Gattung*). The English follows suit only due to the abandonment of classical education: the term “species” refers today to a fully abstract concept.

Observation is something more accurate than mere seeing. Perhaps for this reason, the Romans persisted with the word *species*, and disregarded the word *idéa*, since *species* immediately indicated what was seen as such. If the verb *specere* means in Latin the act of seeing, and *species* the object of seeing, then such an object is followed by what is seen in particular, i.e. the look, shape, outline, likeness, something concrete remaining in relation to cognition and the sensory object.

So we note the first semantic level for the corresponding Greek and Latin words: *ideín* /*specere*, and *idéa* / *species*. The first two refer to the act of seeing, and the second two to the object of seeing. They are all related to sense cognition as an act (activity) or as an object. Nothing here yet indicates the emergence of philosophical idealism.

How, then, can one trace the path of the idea that has led to idealism? This did not happen immediately, because the word “idea” was semantically extremely rich. This can be seen from selected excerpts from the works of writers who refer to this word. The first among them would obviously be Homer.

This greatest of poets uses the word *eidós* in the sense of beautiful appearance. Later, Aeschines (the orator) speaks of a child lovely in appearance (καλοὺς κάγαθοὺς τὰς ιδέας φῦναι) or someone personally handsome (τῆς ιδέας αὐτοῦ). In mythology, Metis (the goddess of prudence), wanting to avoid Zeus’ harassment, took on ever new forms (ideas). Aristophanes in *The Clouds* encourages us to shake off our deathless form (ἀθανάτας ιδέας). In another of his plays, *idéa* has the

meaning of a case: to find the truth, one must examine the case from different angles (πάσας δ' ιδέας ἐξήτασεν). In Herodotus (*The Histories*) it also had the meaning of advice or a view on a subject when there were several choices (διφασίας ιδέας). Isocrates points out the need for giving a comprehensive model and not just truth in rhetorical praise (οὐ μόνον τῆς ἀληθείας αὐτῶν ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς ιδέας ὅλης). The same Isocrates uses the word *idéa* to denote the three basic types of political systems (ιδέας τῶν πολιτειῶν τρεῖς). He also speaks of a broad subject (τοσαύτας ιδέας).¹⁵

These are just examples of the very diverse meanings of the word *idéa* and related words, especially the word *eidōs*. This is indicated by the various meanings of the word *idéa* that we find in the works written in Ancient Greek. Perseus Digital Library contains excerpts from more than 90 Greek-speaking authors who used the word *idéa* not in a philosophical sense, but referring to its colloquial and literary meanings. These include Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Isocrates, Flavius, Pausanias, Strabo, Appian, Aretaeus, Diogenes, Plutarch, Pseudo-Plutarch, Athenaeus, Lucian, Diodorus, Dio Chrysostom, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Aristides, Casius, Philostratus, Asclepiodotus, Longinus, Eusebius of Caesarea, Emperor Julian, John Damascene and Procopius.¹⁶

Is there a transition to Platonic idealism among these meanings? It seems that there is no such transition yet. Although the word *idéa* occurs in various meanings that are somehow derived from vision, this is the level of colloquial and literary language, not philosophical and abstract language. At this stage, idealism is still missing.

When, with whom and under what circumstances does the introduction of the word *idéa* into the philosophical language (in a philo-

¹⁵ A simple search (using Perseus Search Tools) can dig this information out. Accessed May 6th, 2020, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/search>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

sophical sense) take place? It is a circuitous route: first the meaning of the word appears because of a certain circumstance, and only then because of the word itself. Such a procedure takes place in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. In this very dialogue, a certain meaning will be attached to the word *idéa*, but not in the epistemological-ontological sense. Plato asks a question about something that does not yet have a separate name, but is important because it belongs to the moral, legal and religious order. The case concerns murder. Euthyphro has filed a complaint against his own father for killing one of his employees. Plato asks whether Euthyphro did the right thing or not? Should he denounce his own father, even if the father turned out to be a murderer, or should he protect his father as a father? This is a problem that enters the level of ideas. The trouble is that in the translation of this passage into English (and Polish as well), the word *idéa* disappears (!), so the reader will not realize that he or she is dealing with an "idea" already in the philosophical sense, that is, the one that will be an integral part of Plato's system.

Here is that important passage from *Euthyphro*. The discussion concerns the oppositional concepts of holiness/piety (τὸ ὅσιον αὐτὸ αὐτῷ) and unholiness/impiety (τὸ ἀνόσιον). Socrates asks:

What do you say is the nature of piety and impiety, both in relation to murder and to other things? Is not holiness always the same with itself in every action and, on the other hand, is not unholiness the opposite of all holiness, always the same with itself and whatever is to be unholy possessing some one characteristic quality (μίαν τιὰ ἰδέαν)?¹⁷

¹⁷ Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. Harold N. Fowler, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1966, 5c–5d. The Polish translation was done by Władysław Witwicki: *Platona Eutyfron, Obrona Sokratesa, Krition* (Lwów–Warszawa: Książnica Polska, 1926). In Ancient Greek: ποῖόν τι τὸ εὐσεβὲς φησ εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἀσεβὲς [5δ] καὶ περὶ φόνου καὶ περὶ τῶν

The idea appears here as something by which a thing (broadly defined, including as a cause or an act) has and retains its identity in changing contexts and circumstances.¹⁸ This identity applies to both the positive (holiness) and negative (unholiness) categories. Unfortunately, the translator of the Polish version (Władysław Witwicki) changed the Greek word *idéa* to the Polish word *istota* (“essence”), and the translator of the English version (Harold N. Fowler) changed this to “quality.” Both gave an interpretation, and lost the word *idéa*, so crucial to Plato. Cut off was the technical term so important in the system, which, as belonging to the philosophical system, appears in Plato’s works here for the very first time. It is here that the “systemic birth” of the idea in Plato’s philosophy took place—and since it occurred in a moral context, the stronger the reference is to some real state of affairs.

When asked by Socrates about holiness/piety, Euthyphro points to acts of holiness or examples of holiness. But Socrates’ question is not about these examples, but about what holiness/piety is. It is through the types of questions that we arrive at the essential question, which is “What is...?” Once the answer is known, once it is known what the question was about, Plato reaches for a word that has been well known in Greek literature, only to add to it another meaning, the very one that

ἄλλων; ἢ οὐ ταῦτόν ἐστιν ἐν πάσῃ πράξει τὸ ὅσιον αὐτὸ αὐτῷ, καὶ τὸ ἀνόσιον αὖ τοῦ μὲν ὀσίου παντὸς ἐναντίον, αὐτὸ δὲ αὐτῷ ὅμοιον καὶ ἔχον μίαν τινὰ ιδέαν κατὰ τὴν ἀνοσιότητα πᾶν ὅτιπερ ἂν μέλλῃ ἀνόσιον εἶναι.

¹⁸ This semantic procedure takes place against the backdrop of Greek culture’s shift from local (tribal) ethics to universal ethics: goodness and truth are not dependent on blood ties, even those of the closest kin (father and son), but on objective conduct that is either reprehensible or praiseworthy in itself. In the case of Euthyphro, the issue is the accusation he made against his own father regarding murder, which, whether committed by relatives or strangers, is what it is—murder, and therefore something morally wrong.

paves the way for idealism. But at the beginning there is still no indication of this, attention is drawn not to the word, which is very ambiguous, but to the concept behind it and the meaning of the question asked. After all, the question that will become a priority for Plato's philosophy and idealism is first asked without referring directly to these words. There is an open path to idealism, although there is neither the word "idealism" nor the word *idéa* or *eidos* in the idealist sense.

Therefore, the question arises, how did it happen that the word *idéa* appeared in an idealistic sense? The word itself did not immediately evoke idealism. After all, it functioned in various meanings in the Ancient Greek language and did not contain a special intention to reject realism in favor of idealism. On the contrary, because of the moral dimension of the act under discussion, we are as grounded as possible in that which is real. But above the concrete act rises the question of the meaning of many acts that are encompassed by single name, and this one name has one meaning attached to it: there are many impious or pious acts, but they all have one name and, therefore, one idea pertains to them. These actions are impious, those are pious. Determining them requires asking the correct question, which is not "Which actions?" or "How many of them?" but "What is...?"—the question about what this act is (what it represents). And this question will become in Plato the question piloting the search for ideas, while in Aristotle it will be the search for the real being (*to ti en einai*). While Plato will focus on the idea, Aristotle will search for the essence, for which he coined a new expression as elaborate as *to ti en einai*.¹⁹ This expression had its important bearing within the scope of the dispute "realism or idealism."

¹⁹ Cf. Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 180–188.

An essence, Aristotle will say, which is not real, is not an essence.²⁰ Therefore, the word indicating true metaphysical essence is doubly rooted in reality, in being: *to ti en einai*—both *en* and *einai* are grounded in what endures, what was and what is. In contrast, the Platonic idea shifts its weight to content. And this is what opens the way to idealism. But this is made possible by the fact that the Platonic system was oriented precisely to content and meaning, which had their counterpart first in Greek vocabulary and then in Plato's philosophy. This philosophy made it possible for *idéa* (*eidos*, *morphé*), without having an idealistic meaning at their root, to become the prime vehicle of idealism. In the first phase, with the dominance of colloquial and literary language, an idea was a content cognized by man at the sensory level. In the second phase, covered by the Platonic system, it is the content cognized at the intellectual level, a content characterized by immutability, necessity and identity, as well as independence from what is sensual and material. It is this content, which Plato discovers in human cognition as something permanent and determined (despite this content's many changeable aspects) that he calls "an idea," and this idea would rest at the heart of idealism.

However, the starting point for this idealism is realism, which in its initial stage is formed on the basis of visual contact with reality, of which nobody requires possessing the properties of an idea. These properties will become a requirement for certain cognitive content, involving the work of the intellect. Only at that point, the word "idea" and its related words will become the main carrier of idealistic content, and therefore of idealism. For this to happen, however, the idea, in its new sense, must lose contact with material and sensually cognizable reality—for idealism is not only directed toward a certain content that is not present in sensually cognizable reality, but also cuts itself off

²⁰ Cf. Piotr Jaroszyński, *Metafizyka czy ontologia?* [Metaphysics or Ontology?] (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2011), 291–303.

from such reality. The word “idea” alone does not yet make this possible; what is needed is the decisive step toward or away from the point of rejection of that which is concrete and material. For Plato it was dialectics, leading to (but actually built upon) rejection, and for Aristotle it was abstraction, stemming from affirmation.



Idea: From Realism to Idealism

SUMMARY

This paper explores the origins of the dispute “realism or idealism,” which began in philosophy from Plato and Aristotle. Passing over early-modern and modern “isms” and various meanings of the term “idea,” deep in the past we discover the Proto-Indo-European “id” as the root involving the act of seeing and the object that is seen. Ancient Greek *ideín*, *idéa*, *eído* and *eidos*, all stemming from that primitive source, were part and parcel of Greek colloquial and literary language. Plato’s *Euthyphro*, and one particular moral dilemma, was the ground on which *idéa* was introduced to philosophy, albeit the concept was the main concern (“What is holiness?”), while the term was but a makeshift solution at the time. The search for ideas that followed has moved ever further away from the material and sensually cognizable reality, even though it always started with the reality of seeing and of that which was seen. The real being (*to ti en einai*) required abstracting the content for the intellect to work with. Ideas, and all the more idealism, needed dialectics.

Keywords: idea, idealism, realism, Aristotle, Plato, Greek language

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