The Power of Ideas

Lewes Seminar Response by Rich Harris

After considering the materials for this topic, I found myself a bit at sea. On reflection, I believe my quandary stemmed from the shape shifting use of the term, “idea” and unexamined assumptions about their purported “power.”

In the materials, “idea” is used to mean, variously: an argument; a concept; an ideology; a testable theory; an aspiration; a virtue; and an aesthetic perspective. Each of these usages has some intuitive appeal but also carries drawbacks. For instance, in his essay “Good Ideas and Great Ideas,” Satell rates ideas on utilitarian grounds (do they have a purpose) and on scientific rigor (are they specific, empirical and falsifiable). By this measure, MLK’s famous 1963 address rested on an inferior idea, unalienable rights, an awkward conclusion a best.

Another source of uncertainty is the implied causal relations among idea, individuals, and impacts. In some cases, ideas are portrayed as independent (causal) variables. Sarah Lee, in this vein, asserts “ideas have the power to shape culture and societal norms.” Is that true? Or are ideas tools, that individuals, organizations, and movements deploy to effect change – or to maintain the status quo? That strikes me as more than a pedantic question; it is fundamental to understanding why and how ideas are powerful. A second illustration of this loosey goosey discussion of ideas and their impact is the short piece from the Brock Institute. It begins with the dubious assertion that the Wright Brothers “discovered flight” and then attributes transformative changes to their ideas, without specifying what those ideas are or how they caused transformation. The Wrights had an insight from their bicycle business on how to engineer a three-dimensional control system, solving a problem that earlier aviation pioneers could not. Did that insight transform society? Or was it part of a chain of innovations, including avionics, mass production, and government support, that led to commercial flight and military applications?

At the end of the Brock piece though, there is a nugget that suggested some clarification for me. It alludes to Plato’s theory of forms, or abstract ideals that lead to deeper understanding. This seems to me a more fruitful route to appreciating the power of ideas. Even if we do not fully accept Plato’s “idea” that these abstract ideals hold the key to accurate, empirical understanding the real world, I think he does point to the “momentous” role they play in history. To revisit the two examples above, one might posit that MLK relied on the abstract ideals of justice and natural rights, while the Wright Brothers relied on ideals of geometric logic and inductive reasoning. Perhaps in considering the power of ideas, we should be thinking about first principles v. derivative ideas. Of course, that begs the question of how we can distinguish first principles from derivative ideas.

One possibility is that epistemological ideas, that is ideas about **how** we can know things to be true, are higher order ideals. In this sense, Satell is right to focus on the hypothetico-deductive method as a basis for powerful ideas, but I would say that method itself is the powerful idea. He he is on shaky ground, however, in claiming that scientific way of knowing is superior to other epistemological approaches such as the moral reasoning MLK deployed. Francis Bacon famously acknowledged the validity of both approaches: MLK reasoned by what Bacon called “the anticipation of the mind” while Satell prefers reasoning through “the interpretation of nature.”

Another answer might be to unpack first principles from derivatives on a case-by-case basis. With respect to our prompt about “destructive ideas,” for example, eugenics strikes me as a derivative idea, drawing **erroneously** on the Darwinian first principle of natural selection. We could lump Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism into this bucket as well. Thus, natural selection is an abstract ideal that spawned destructive ideas like eugenics as well as constructive ideas like evolution.[[1]](#footnote-1) Tackling the second part of this prompt about how destructive ideas gain credence, I’d hypothesize that eugenics gained acceptance in part because of its patina of epistemological rigor and the institutional prerogatives of those purveying the arguments. It also appealed to wider audiences because it validated interests and biases of significant elements in society. But I’d also argue that eugenics’ derivation from first principles was the basis of its undoing; the power of the Darwinian idea overcame the eugenics movement, albeit after plenty of destructive outcomes. A similar story might be told about white supremacy; it is marginalized, not because bigotry and cupidity were eradicated, but because it cuts against the grain of first principles and abstract ideals that proved more powerful over time.

This distinction between first principles and derivative ideas also suggests responses to our 1st prompt about the “single most influential (powerful?) idea in human history” and to the 5th prompt for a powerful non-western idea. I think the idea of *dualism* is an abstract ideal that speaks to both prompts. Initially, I was thinking of *monotheism* as the most influential idea in human history, but as I pondered this, it occurred to me that the one could say there is there is a duality at the core of monotheism such that the ideal of one God insists on recognizing an ontological division between God and human, good and evil, virtue and vice, believers and non-believers, spiritual and material. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to tease out how destructive and constructive ideas, otherness and inclusivity, science and metaphysics, or even dialectical thesis and antithesis all derive from or align with this dualism. It also doesn’t take much effort to see how this same ideal of dualism appears non-western thought. The Hindu idea of dualism is expressed in the concepts of *purusha* (conscious reality) and *prakriti* (material reality) or the contrast between Vishnu and Shiva. In Confucianism, the ideas of *yin* and *yang* convey a conception of dualism as well. Although a notion of dualism seems universal, there are differences between eastern and western versions. Thus, western dualism, whether expressed by Abrahamic religious scholars, by Acquinas, or by Descartes posits a sharp distinction between mind and body, between mental and material, and between the subject that understands and the object that is understood.[[2]](#footnote-2) On the other hand, Hindu or Confucian dualism sees an underlying unity or at least complementarity in contending ideals. Moreover, in my limited knowledge of African belief systems, I think there is also a notion that, like the eastern religious traditions, hinges on a “duality” but one rooted in synthesis or connectivity especially between the individual and the surrounding world.

1. Note, we might also acknowledge that Darwin developed powerful ideas because he relied on a scientific epistemology. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is important to note that there are contending western views, most notably Romanticism, that argue for an essential oneness with nature and appeal to pagan rather than Abrahamic or Enlightenment traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)