

HISTORY OF IDEAS

While some ideas are specifically about the historical development of thought, it can be said of every individual idea that it has its own past history, and its future influence. This makes the field so vast and complex that few general truths can be propounded about the historical behaviour of ideas. Nevertheless, we can discern a number of aspects to the history of ideas, which help us to focus on the rich context surrounding any philosophical thinking.

It is fairly routine for modern teachers of philosophy to announce that they are teaching real and current theoretical problems, and that if the history of thought is your concern, you should probably switch to another subject. This attitude is widespread in the analytic tradition of philosophy, to the point where many good philosophers hardly read anything written before 1880, but such neglect tends to appal thinkers in the continental tradition. This matches the strong empathy analytic philosophers have with the sciences (and the dream of 'progress'), where continental philosophers see more value in history and literature. There is, then, an open question as to whether we understand an idea better if we explore its history, or whether such studies illuminate the history, but not the idea itself.

Alongside that question, we can ask whether the way in which thought developed in a remote historical period has any value for modern philosophical understanding. It is possible that all the worthy ideas are still with us, and forgotten ideas got what they deserved, so that only museum curators will study the dead ones. On the other hand, a current idea may well be clearest when we examine its first origin, understand the situation to which it was responding, and see the immediate objections raised by those who first encountered it.

Philosophers who are indifferent to the history of ideas appear to treat them as static and timeless. A rival view might claim, however, that no such ideas exist, and that the favourite words and concepts of philosophers undergo continual evolution, as both the facts and the theories that surround them change. If that rival view is correct, then at least some feeling for the shifting nature of a concept seems needed for full understanding, and that will require historical background. A stronger claim might be that without a fairly full grasp of the history of an idea, a proper grasp of it is almost impossible.

There are other aspects of important ideas which are missed if we neglect their history. Some ideas undergo major shifts in their meaning and reference. Such shifts are usually well known, and we all understand that (for example) the word 'democracy' can mean very different things in other times and places. Not so clear, without careful study of its history, is the more subtle shifts which a term can undergo. The very word 'idea' had a different emphasis in the seventeenth century, and we find historically informed philosophers telling us that sometimes the older concept is more valuable than our current version (Greek *eudaimonia*, rather than modern 'happiness', for example). Shifts of application can also be revealing, as when 'thought' is applied to animals, and then to machines.

A worthy but less important aspect of the history of ideas is pursuit of the question 'who thought of it first?'. The famous priority dispute over who invented calculus in mathematics now looks like a rather minor footnote in the history of ideas, but there is a very important aspect to this area of study. Students of the subject who learn their modern philosophy, and only plunge back into the history at a later stage, are often amazed to find how many modern ideas have been anticipated long ago, and respect for our ancestors is thereby greatly increased. Conversely, there is a tendency among those who know less about early thinkers to adopt a rather patronising and dismissive attitude to them, assuming that they did their best, but mostly got it wrong, like small children doing nuclear physics. A rather warped view of human history, thought and culture thereby results. If you are not somewhat in awe of the thinking of the early Greeks, you are still a novice in philosophy.

One game that is not worth playing is the spotting of 'anticipations' – finding a sentence in an early thinker which 'anticipates' some great idea that emerged later, and seeing nothing more in it than an early glimmer of a truth that was then lost, rather than a significant part of the mosaic of earlier views. Another rather dubious focus for the subject is the tracking of 'influences'. The way in which one thinker transforms an idea from another thinker can be very illuminating, but merely observing in detail where great thinkers picked up their initial thoughts doesn't seem to tell us much, given that creative thought actually occurs as much during conversations as it does during reading.

If we pause, and ask the preliminary question 'what do we mean by an "idea"?', an interesting issue emerges. We talk of evolving 'concepts', but there are also full-blown 'thoughts' or 'propositions' (which can be true or false, rather than merely applicable). But students of belief will tell you that we are often not conscious of many of the propositions which we hold true. We all believe that there are more than 50 fish in the sea, but have probably never articulated the thought. If our heads are full of such things, should they figure in our history of ideas, or must we stick to what has been put into words? We may wish to speculate about those subliminal thoughts, but the resulting history of ideas would be a rather imprecise discipline.

A different approach is to ask which ideas in the history of our civilisation seem to be most 'important', but here too we are faced with rival answers. The obvious candidates for the important ideas are the revolutionary ideas. Certain ideas have swiftly changed our attitudes towards social organisation, towards moral behaviour, towards human nature, and towards modes of enquiry. But equally we might say that the enduring ideas are the really important ones. If western civilization traces its origins to classical Greece, there are presumably assumptions from that world which distinctively persist in ours, and revealing that intellectual bedrock might lead to more self-understanding than any insight into revolutions.

We can ask which ideas are important, but we also can ask a bigger question: how important is thought? The challenge here is that thought may not lead our civilisation at all, but merely traipse around following economics, practical inventions and chance events, making the history of ideas a rather trivial matter. The view that great thinking leads our civilization will need defending, given such a challenge.