

The End of the Age of Ideas

Ideas are over. We just haven't realised it yet.

You might find it strange to hear about the death of ideas from a philosopher, which is what I am. Since being a young Oxford don, I've spent my professional life working with ideas, in the same way a baker would work with bread. Ideas have been my stock-in-trade. But after thirty years, I realise that ideas have had their day. It's time to shut the bakery down. Ideas, I have come to realise, are not where it's at.

It's not that the demand isn't there. Every day people queue up for their ideas, like they'd queue up at a French boulangerie for their croissant or their baguette. People are still hungry for ideas, hungrier than ever, possibly. New ideas are tracked down and ravenously devoured. Everybody loves an idea. And the good news is that you can consume as many ideas as you like and never put on any weight at all. Ideas are totally fat free!

Even the idea of the death of ideas is an idea, as you'll already have worked out. And it's an idea you'll probably want to consume. 'Tell me your idea about the death of ideas! I want to hear more!'. There's no problem with the appetite. The appetite for ideas is still going strong.

And yet, as I say, ideas are over.

To understand how it's come to pass that ideas are on their death-bed, you need to put things in their historical context. You need to go back to where we started in order to understand where we have arrived.

We can think about Western history in four phases culminating in what I would call The Age of Ideas, which is the age we are living in, and the age that I would argue is coming to an end.

The first phase is what I would call the Age of Superstition. It's the age before the spread of formal religion, the age of pagan practices, of nature worship. Think of Stone Henge, if you like. A time of ritual, of many gods, of astrology, of magic, and an attitude of almighty awe towards the sun. There is a strong sense of the world being controlled by mysterious forces. It is the task of human beings to bow down to these forces and try to interpret their inscrutable and capricious ways. What is the meaning of an eclipse? Are the gods hiding from us? What about an earthquake? Are they punishing us? How about a comet? Are the gods themselves at war in the sky? These are fearful, naive and uncertain times. It can be called the Age of Superstition.

With the rise of formal religion, especially the religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the age of superstition begins to give way to an idea of the one god, a god no longer confused with the workings of nature, a god that stands above nature as its creator. This is the Age of Religion. The Church explicitly puts clear water between itself and those former superstitious practices. It emphasises that religious practice is no form of magic such as that practised in the Age of Superstition. Religion is a way of receiving God's truth in the world.

Now, there are lots of atheists and sceptics today who'd say that there's no real difference between the Age of Superstition and the Age of Religion. It's all mumbo jumbo. Religion is just another form of superstition, magic, and fantasy. But whether you're a sceptical atheist or not, religion became official. It was the central practice around which societies would organise themselves, and so it became normal. Think of historic English villages with their medieval church in the middle. Religion stood at the centre of social life. It was the given, the hub around which the world turned.

By the seventeenth century, however, the Age of Religion is beginning its decline. As it falls, so the Age of Reason rises. The Age of Reason is the age of the new science, of empirical experiments, of the first machines, of Newton's work on optics and light and force and motion. Human beings

begin to get the idea that everything in the universe can be explained. This is also the time of the Industrial Revolution, of mechanisation, of factories and organised labour. The machine becomes the dominant metaphor of the times. There's no divine mystery, just a set of physical laws to be worked out. So God begins to be displaced, or at least questioned.

At this point, you might be thinking that the Age of Religion is still very much with us. You might be thinking of the strength of Catholicism in South America, for example, or the power of Islam that is attracting so many headlines today. Which is true. The Age of Religion hasn't gone away. So instead of thinking of the Age of Reason simply succeeding the Age of Religion, it's better to picture these ages as the strata in a cliff face. And so the Age of Superstition is the first layer, the bottom layer. The Age of Religion builds up on top of it, but doesn't completely obliterate it. The Age of Reason builds up on top of the Age of Religion, but doesn't completely obliterate it either. So the different Ages co-exist. But the one at the top dominates. So in today's secular society, there are still plenty of people who have their own faith, and there are even people such as Druids who continue paganistic practices that stretch back to the Age of Superstition.

For the past century, however, the Age of Reason has seen another layer forming on top of it, putting down a new sediment which I am calling the Age of Ideas. This is very much the story of the twentieth century, the gradual shift from Reason to Ideas, from rationality to creativity. One way of understanding this shift is to picture two iconic moments in twentieth century: the production of the Model T Ford motor car, and the Nazi programme of ethnic cleansing. Henry Ford's vision made cars available to a whole new middle class. He did this by mechanising and automating the car building process, thus increasing volumes and driving down production costs. Where they had previously been scarce and expensive, cars became abundant and affordable. It was a kind of miracle, but it was based on a purely rational approach to car making that emphasised efficiency. The Age of Reason was at its height, using rationality to produce machines for living. However, it was just such rationalistic efficiency that lay behind the Holocaust. One of the chief concerns of the Nazis was to make the killing process as efficient as possible, to convert life into death with minimum waste. The death camps were factories, in effect, and they used reason to completely inhuman ends.

That was the fatal flaw in the Age of Reason. Reason taken to an extreme could be so rational, so rationalistic, that it became cold, inhuman, detached. If the Nazi genocide is too vivid an example, think of the more ordinary practice of bureaucracy. In principle, bureaucracy is a rational way of organising public affairs. It gives people numbers, files them into categories. But as we all know, bureaucracy can be terribly inhuman. Take this example from the BBC News website of 2013:

A broadband bill sent to a deceased man, which included a fine for late payment, has been shared more than 53,000 times by Facebook users.

Social media experts say it is a reminder of the importance of responding quickly and publicly to complaints made on social networks.

The man's son-in-law, Jim Boyden, posted a photograph of the bill, along with a message addressed to Virgin Media, on the social media network.

Virgin Media said sorry to the family.

Alongside a £63.89 charge the bill stated "D.D Denied-Payer deceased", a reference to the fact the dead man's bank had refused a direct debit payment. Under this Virgin added a "late payment charge" of £10.

"We obviously apologise for the bill and have spoken to Mr Boyden to bring this account to a close more sensitively," a spokesperson told the BBC.

That is an example of the tendency in bureaucracy to become inhuman. It is based on reason and efficiency, but it loses sight of what really matters.

So the Age of Reason in the twentieth century was seen to have some flaws. After the second world war in particular, people in the west wanted to start again. Machines were now a bit too

associated with warfare - guns, tanks, planes. Instead of the mechanised rationality of the dark recent past, people wanted a sense of the future, a sense of possibility and potential. In short, they wanted ideas. And so, for the past half century or so, it is ideas in the West that have become the most valuable currency of all. As a culture we have fallen in love with ideas. In almost any walk of life, ideas are encouraged, welcomed, sought out, aired, debated and recycled. From public platforms to dinner party conversations, from university departments to the board rooms of companies, ideas are the fare for which everyone is hungry. Tell someone you have an idea and the door will always open. Conversely, when you've got no more ideas, it's as if you're useless. Your race is run. To be short on ideas is to feel as if your life-force itself is diminished. It's almost shameful. Better to have ideas; and even better to keep having new ones. Ours is the Age of Ideas.

But because the Age of Ideas is our age, it's harder to see it. You can't see things in the present with the clarity you can see things in the past. We don't have hindsight yet. It's even harder to see that the Age of Ideas is coming to an end, but let me give a couple of examples.

Take brainstorming. Brainstorming is the practice of coming up with new ideas. People sit around in a group throwing out ideas in the belief that they will hit upon something life-changing that nobody has thought of before. In practice, this rarely happens. If you were to walk into an office where people are brainstorming today, I can guarantee that you would hear at least one of the following words thrown out: 'digital', 'viral', 'gaming', 'app' or 'Apple', 'neuro', 'scaleable', 'online', 'social media', 'curate', 'Google', etc. The point is that instead of generating new ideas, the brainstorm mainly recycles existing buzzwords. It's less about creating than re-creating the Zeitgeist. So brainstorms are often disappointing, and the breakthrough that people sought remains elusive. The pursuit of new ideas ends in a cul-de-sac.

The other example is TED talks. Various so-called inspirational speakers are filmed giving talks to an invited audience, and the videos are then posted on YouTube. There are thousands of TED talks with hundreds of thousands of hits, on subjects ranging from architecture to zoology. These videos are so avidly consumed because they are a medium for conveying ideas, which is what people want. Like the brainstorm, however, these talks can often leave you feeling empty, precisely because all you're consuming is ideas, which are abstract and insubstantial. What's more, the ideas are so rapidly shared that they become familiar very quickly and get recycled over and over. The point being that our relationship to ideas has become a consumerist relationship. We consume ideas like we consume sweets. They've become just a form of entertainment.

Brainstorming and TED talks are just two indications that the Age of Ideas which has been so dominant since the end of the second world war, is coming to an end. Or rather, that it is becoming just another layer in the cliff face. It won't go away, but the chances are that it will be built on by something new.

So what might this new layer be? What lies beyond the Age of Ideas? As I already mentioned, the idea of a beyond of ideas is still an idea. So there's a double bind. We can only think from the age we are in. Nevertheless, I think there are some glimmers of what's to come that we can point to.

What the Age of Reason and the Age of Ideas have in common is that both give privileged status to our heads. Using reason and having ideas involves exercising our minds. They are 'heady' activities, or to give it a more technical term, they are both 'cognitive' activities. I believe that if there is a beyond of the Age of Ideas, it will feature a rebalancing so that we will get back in touch with other aspects of ourselves - our emotions, our instincts and our intuition, in particular, but also our bodies.

I think many of us had a sense of this during the financial crisis of 2008. As stories emerge from those turbulent days, it seems that many of the bankers involved had let their heads get the better of them, using their financial tools to structure debts in a way that made it seem rational to lend money to people who couldn't pay it back. But many of them, and many of us, knew at a gut level

that all that borrowing and spending wasn't sustainable. Our instincts were telling us this, but we were suppressing our instincts because the bankers and the economists - trades based very much on head work - were telling us it was all okay. We should have listened to our gut feeling much more. Today, several years later, perhaps the most obvious sign of our frustration with ideas and our move beyond them is the phenomenon of mindfulness. Essentially, mindfulness is a form of meditation in which we are explicitly asked to switch our heads off in order to be present. It's not just an antidote to all the distraction we suffer in the form of technology, it's also a way of saying that we have got too lost inside our own heads, and we need to get out of them, and re-learn how to experience the world in a more direct and intuitive way.

I hesitate to call this the Age of Intuition or to give it a name at all. The very approach I have been using, of dividing history up into different ages, is cognitive - analytical, rational. On the other hand, giving something a name helps us to identify it. Whatever we call this latest shift in Western culture - and we're only at the very very beginning of it - I can only think it's positive. As human beings we have the gift of many faculties, not just those in our head, and it can only be good for us to mobilise more of who we are.