An ambitious work of philosophical synthesis

Ideas: A History from Fire to Freud
by Peter Watson
(Phoenix, 2006, 1,118 pages)

Ideas is one of those stupendous books that turns up now and again, attempting the impossible task of making sense of our history. Like physics’s holy grail—The Theory of Everything—it is ambitious and attempts to synthesise the myriad threads of the significant ideas that formed Western civilisation, and ultimately its success and prosperity. For anyone interested in the power of ideas, and the unique reasons that make the West what it is, this ambitious book deserves to be widely read.

The author, Peter Watson, succeeds in providing a most remarkable overview of the intellectual development of humans from the discovery of fire up to the beginning of the twentieth century. His skill is considerable in maintaining a coherent, overarching perspective which is both absorbing and exciting. In many respects it is the juxtaposition of the practical Aristotelian heritage against the Platonic utopianism that has played out over the ages. It is this struggle between these two urges in the present political world that can help us better understand the challenges faced by the West from Islamic terrorism, global warming, justice and inequality, Third World development, or even the self-hatred of many within the West itself.

After looking at the emergence of language, the control of fire and agriculture, Watson moves on to the first ‘set’ of immense changes in human civilisation, the so-called Axial Age of the ancient world or, in the words of Karl Jaspers, ‘the most deep cut dividing line in history’. This period saw the invention of ‘history’ itself, the exploration of the physical world with the Atomists, mathematics, astronomy, literature, and the long shadows cast by Plato and Aristotle. The author moves forward to provide a particularly deft and lucid description of the complex sets of interactions between the Judaic tradition, the propagation of the Christian message of St Paul, the Roman world and its Law, the decline and virtual disappearance of Hellenism, the gradual withdrawal from Aristotelian thinking, and the eclipse of the Hellenistic values that accompanied the fall of Rome and the subsequent plunge into the ‘dark ages’.

Watson calls this period the ‘near death of the book’. While attributing it to a combination of pressures—natural causes, the barbarian invasions, the rise of Christianity, the rise of the Arabs—he shows how the rise of the influence of the anti-intellectual St Paul, in the fourth century, had an effect on the decline of classical learning. The dialectical method—as epitomised by Aristotle, for example—was outlawed. ‘The scientific study of the heavens could be neglected’, claimed Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (374-39) for ‘wherein does it assist our salvation?’ The Hellenist idea of a round Earth—and remember the exact size of the Earth and distance to the Moon had already been calculated hundreds of years before—was so thoroughly rejected that, in 748AD, a Christian priest named Vergilius was convicted of heresy for believing in the Antipodes.

So, far from recounting an inevitable and linear progress in Western thought, the book gives us a greater understanding of just how easy it could have been to have lost all that went before. As we know, classical ideas were saved and preserved only because they were hoarded by Arab interpreters. Watson provides valuable insights into the nature of this continuation and the mechanisms for transmission through both the Islamic Middle East and Spain, and their subsequent re-emergence.

Consequently, the author nominates the two centuries from 1050-1250AD as central to the emergence of the West.
from this stupor and how the explosion of new ideas at that time were central to the West's identity and spectacular growth. Numbered in this period was the influence of Thomas Aquinas who attempted an amalgamation of Aristotelianism and Christianity, helping to fashion the possibility of a secular world, cathedrals and the emergence of universities, crop rotation, the invention of the experiment, the rise of accuracy—in counting, measuring, punctuation—the introduction of equal hours and silent reading (essential for subversive thoughts), the widespread adoption of Hindu numerals, the development of musical notation and double-entry bookkeeping.

There is no room to go into the numerous turns and eddies of this book, but Watson really does touch on everything: Hume, Burke, Mill, Kant, Freud, the radical effects of the romantic movement, of Darwinism and the discovery of deep time, the rise of America, sociology, the concept of the average man, and modernism in all its guises.

In the end, Watson comes down heavily on the side of the take-no-prisoners 'atheist' position, echoing Richard Dawkin's view that 'ethical monotheism ..., as opposed to a religious philosophical notion. From the world of the soul to the world of the experiment is the fundamental difference between the ancient world and the modern.

Nevertheless, one of the consequences of this sense of the 'second self', or inner voice, is that it is this which inflamed the Romantics and has led to the dead-end research of Freud and the therapeutic society; in Watson's words, 'the last great turning in'. But, according to him, science is gradually showing us that there is no soul, that the Platonic ideal notion of the 'inner self' is misconceived. He concludes that, 'Looking in, we have found nothing'.

What are the implications for us today? This inner voice has become that of the Left, the moral vanity of conviction politics, leading people, paradoxically, to a rejection of scientific objectivity, with a swag of new beliefs in Platonic utopian ideals, with futile solutions to the environment, injustice and poverty, and at the same time leading to the discounting of empirical evidence or logical argument. This is indeed the heritage of the West's 'turning in' which Karl Popper, over 50 years ago, warned us about The Open Society and its Enemies. There is an urgent challenge to maintain and continue to argue for an open exchange of ideas and thereby explain those things that have made the West a uniquely free, prosperous and open society.