

An ambitious work of philosophical synthesis

Andrew McIntyre reviews

Ideas: A History from Fire to Freud

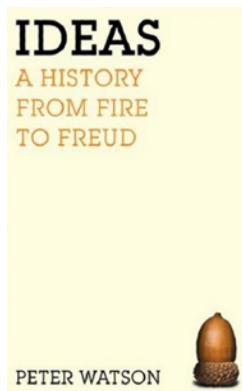
by Peter Watson

(Phoenix, 2006, 1,118 pages)

I*deas* is one of those stupendous books that turns up now and again, attempting the impossible task of making sense of our history. Like physic'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-ha-

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tred 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 Hellenistic 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

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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 ... has been responsible for most of the wars and bigotry in history'. It would seem that nothing much of value came from Christianity—apart from some art. This is surprising, considering the critical role of the Church that Watson describes in some detail.

Watson affirms that the material and political success of the West is based squarely, almost without exception, on scientific innovations based on observation, experimentation, and deduction. Experimentation, he says, is

all important here as an independent, rational (and therefore dem-

ocratic) form of *authority*. And it is this, the authority of the experiment, the authority of the scientific *method*, independent of the status of the individual scientist, his proximity to God or to his king, and as revealed and reinforced via myriad technologies, which we can all share, that underlies the modern world.

This is the heritage of Aristotle, that eminently empirical thinker who once undertook a survey of 158 different political systems from Marseilles to Cyprus and became convinced that an ideal state did not, and could not, exist.

Contrasted with this is Watson's other big theme, that of the exploration of man's inner life, his soul or second self; what we might label Platonic. Probably the most original idea in Watson's analysis is the role of the 'soul' in forming the Western sense of self, the individuality that gave him his ability and motivation to analyse the material world around him. This capacity certainly distinguishes Western man from all other cultures until the recent past. Watson argues that the preoccupation with the soul and the afterlife gave religion, on the one hand, a way to control men's minds, especially through the medieval period, and inhibited freedom of thought and progress.

However, the abuses of what we might call 'soul technology' in the Roman Church lead to the Reformation, took that control from the clergy, and hastened doubt and non-belief. Watson traces the various transformations from the tripartite soul of the *Timaeus*, the Renaissance concept of *homo duplex*, Marvell's dialogue between the soul and the body, Hobbes' argument that no 'soul or spirit existed', and Descartes' reconfiguration of the soul as a *philosophical* as opposed to a religious

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.

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