Ideas and Ideologies

- Why did the idea or ideology emerge?
- How did it affect people?
- How is it perceived?
- How did it become so influential?
- Is it still influenced and why?
- How does this fit into the bigger picture?

Scientific Ideas – Religious Ideas – Political Ideologies – Philosophical Ideas – Cultural Ideas

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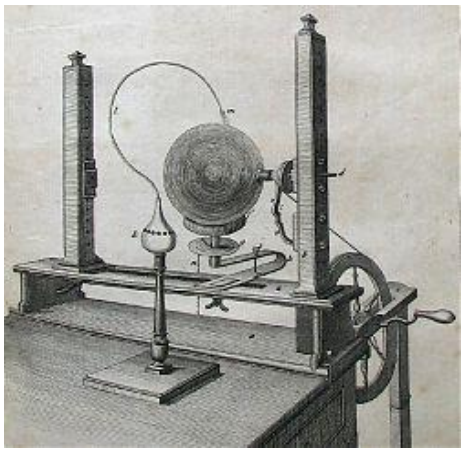
We live in an age where important ideas tend to be associated with technological inventions and scientific theories mainly because they have had such an important impact on our lives. Electricity, the telephone, the automobile, the airplane, space travel, the computer, the Internet. Just a few examples from what could easily be a very long list of modern inventions. In each case someone or some group of people has had an idea about how mathematics, the sciences or technology could be applied in a practical way to everyday problems and needs.

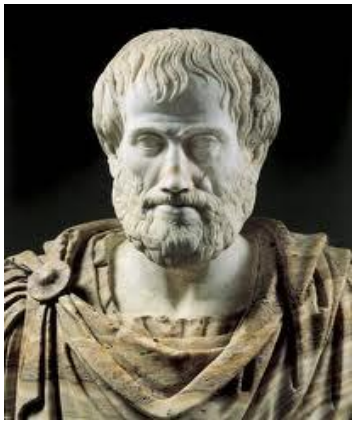
At the same time we can also think of a number of ways in which mathematics and science have changed the way we look at the world and the way we understand nature. The Theory of Relativit y has changed how we think about space and time. Quantum Mechanics has changed how we think about the nature of matter. The 'Big Bang Theory' has challenged traditional ideas about the origins of the universe and the theory of evolution has challenged traditional ideas about the origins of human beings and the diversity of species that can be found on this planet.



An experimental electrical apparatus built by Priestley. Familiar Introduction to Electricity, 1768.

Underpinning these scientific theories are big questions which human beings have been asking themselves throughout history. Where do we come from? How was the earth created, and when? Is the earth fixed in space or does it move? What is the relationship between the earth, the sun and the moon? Greek philosophers, like Aristotle, living in the 4th Century BCE, came up with answers to these questions which remained virtually unchallenged for more than 1800 years. This was partly because the answers seemed to agree with people's commonsense understanding of nature but also because his answers could be incorporated into the teachings of Christianity. For Aristotle, the earth was the centre of the universe and it was motionless. That fitted very neatly with Christian ideas about heaven and hell.

By the 16th Century the Aristotelian view of the universe was being challenged. Copernicus had concluded from his astronomical observations and calculations that Aristotle was wrong and that it was the sun not the earth that was at the centre of the universe. His ideas were denounced by the church but no further action was taken against him. Over the next 50 years most scholars who were interested in astronomy continued to accept the Aristotelian view. But by the early 17th century Galileo's observations through the telescope which he had developed, identified four moons of Jupiter and showed that they circled the planet not the earth. When he observed the different phases of Venus it was clear to him that Copernicus was right and that the sun not the earth was the centre of the universe. He was denounced to the Inquisition for supporting ideas that were contrary to scripture and the teachings of the Church. He was warned to abandon his theories and promised to do so. But 16 years later he published his ideas, was



Aristotle

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brought before the Inquisition again and found guilty of heresy. He was held under house arrest until his death ten years later. Nevertheless a scientific revolution had begun.

French Revolution

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, continued to uphold the old, established view. By the 18th century it had permitted censored versions of Galileo's works to be published but it was not until the mid-19th century that the uncensored version of his most controversial work, the *Dialogue concerning the two chief systems of the world*, was removed from the Vatican's Index of Prohibited Books.

Although the word ideology does not come into use until after the French Revolution there is a clear sense here, long before the Enlightenment and the emergence of the first secular or non-religious society, that the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church were operating like an ideology: a religious ideology.

Essentially an ideology is a self-contained set of ideas, convictions and assumptions by which a group of people make sense of the world. It provides an explanation of how things have come to be as they arebsome indication of where they are heading, guidance on how we should act and some criteria to help us decide whether an argument is valid or not.

For much of the 17th and 18th centuries there was an intellectual struggle in Europe between the representatives of the Christian faith and practicing scientists. It became more complicated after the Protestant Reformation but essentially the debate continued up to and beyond the Enlightenment. Although scientific theories have some of the characteristics of an ideology in that they seek to explain how things have come to be as they are and often predict how they will develop in the future the key difference is that they are not self-contained and resistant to contradictory information. The idea that we have of scientific method is the complete opposite of that. A theory emerges on the basis of controlled observations and mathematical calculations and immediately other scientists begin to test it. If the evidence confirms the theory it will become established provisionally, until it is contradicted by new evidence that provides a better explanation.

Enlightenment: Religion in the 18th Century

However, in the 1960s an American physicist, Thomas Kuhn, argued that scientists do not usually work in this way and scientific theory does not evolve simply through the process of accumulating new evidence. Lets return to Galileo for a moment to demonstrate what Kuhn is saying. Think of an object in motion: a ball or a wheel rolling along a flat path. It will soon come to a halt unless something or someone continues to push it. Aristotle had argued that for the motion of an object to be sustained it

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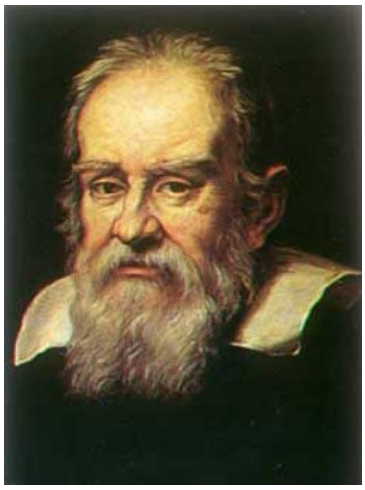
must continue to be pushed. Most people at the time thought this was reasonable, it was commonsense. So this explanation of motion continued to be used for centuries afterwards. But along comes Galileo and says perhaps the reason why objects come to a halt after a while is because friction slows them down. Without friction the object would continue to maintain its speed without any further force. But this was pure guesswork on Galileo's part. He did not have the means to test his theory. It just made sense to him. Some other scientists, interested in Astronomy, began to realise that Galileo's ideas might help them to explain the motion of planets and eventually Isaac Newton took these different ideas and findings and developed a single theory of motion and planetary motion.



Galileo

What Kuhn argued was that scientists spend most of their careers trying to solve puzzles thrown up by existing scientific theories. When their findings do not seem to confirm those existing theories they tend to see such findings as anomalies or irregularities. Their first response is not to say, "*Ah ha! I've proved that the old theory is false. We need a new theory*". Instead they tend to think that these are puzzles that they have not solved yet but in time they will and this might mean that minor adjustments to the theory will need to be made. But, says Kuhn, these scientists will not lose faith in the established theory for as long as no credible alternative is available.

Now, it is interesting that Kuhn uses the word faith here because there is a sense in which he is suggesting that established scientific theories can function as ideologies as well. The main difference is that with most social, political or economic ideologies the committed ideologue may well cling to the ideology even when other credible alternatives exist because the ideology defines who he or she is: Liberal, Conservative, Socialist, Nationalist, Environmentalist, Christian, Jew or Muslim.

So, for most of human history religion had a monopoly when it has come to providing answers to many of the questions people ask about their world. From the 16th century onwards science increasingly offered an alternative set of answers to those questions . But, of course, people are social animals. We also ask questions which scientists are not interested in and, in any case, could not answer. What is right and wrong? What is good and bad? How does living in a state of nature differ from living in a society? What are our responsibilities and obligations as a member of society and what are our rights? Should our positions in society – our status – depend on who our parents were and how wealthy we are or should everyone be treated as equals? These are important questions about society's values: how we should live and how we should treat each other.

In the second half of the 18th century new ideas and values were emerging that were critical of old customs, myths, superstitions and institutions like absolute monarchy and the Church. At the heart of these ideas and values was the belief that all questions and issues concerning human beings were capable of being solved by reason. Doing something in a particular way because it had always been done that way, which is the essence of traditionalism, or doing something because religious leaders told you it was God's will were regarded as irrational. To follow reason was to be enlightened.

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If such ideas had only been adopted by a small number of philosophers and educated people then the ideologies which emerged would have had a very limited impact on ordinary people. But a number of major social, cultural and technological changes had taken place in the 18th century which supported the spread of new ideas and values. The invention of the movable type printing press in the 15th century had already contributed to the spread of new ideas during the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance. By the 18th century more kinds of books were being published and in much larger numbers along with pamphlets, newspapers and journals. Literacy levels had increased. A new kind of civil society had begun to emerge. People joined political clubs, went to coffee houses and cafes and organised debating societies to discuss the issues of the day. The unthinkable was being thought and more and more people were thinking it. The writings of Voltaire, Rousseau and Thomas Paine were being used to justify the overthrow of the old regime in France and British rule in America.

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In both cases the revolutionary ideologies were secular. They did not justify revolution by an appeal to God and they did not draw on Christian symbols and language to motivate people. The old ideas of hierarchy and tradition were replaced by new ideas about citizenship and human rights and underpinning these ideas were values: beliefs in freedom, equality, fraternity or solidarity.

In France fear of counter-revolutionaries led to the Reign of Terror and then to dictatorship and ultimately the Napoleonic Empire. In America the newly-won rights and liberties were not extended to women, slaves or native Americans. Nevertheless the ideas that came to prominence in those revolutionary days were now spreading around the world and could not be suppressed for ever. Demands for Republicanism emerged in countries governed by monarchies. Elsewhere the growing middle class was attracted by Liberalism which promoted liberty and Constitutional Government. They were less sure about equality if it meant that the uneducated masses also had the vote. Nationalism appealed to peoples who wanted independence from the old multi-national Empires. With the growth of industrialisation a new working class was emerging and they were attracted to ideologies such as Socialism, Communism and Syndicalism which promoted the idea of workers organising themselves into trade unions. And these ideologies, with their emphasis on radical change led to counter-ideologies in support of tradition and slower, evolutionary progress.

Not surprisingly, some historians have labelled the 19th century as the Age of Ideologies. But our experiences of the 20th century might lead us to suggest that the 19th century was just the First Age of Ideologies and that the emergence of National Socialism, Fascism, Stalinism and a variety of other forms of totalitarianism should lead us to call the 20th Century, the Second Age of Ideologies. After the momentous events of 1989 in central and eastern Europe some observers, particularly in the United States suggested that the end of the Cold War also signified the end of ideology. No sooner had they said this than wars broke out in the former Yugoslavia, nationalist political parties emerged in other parts of eastern Europe and in Western Europe another kind of nationalist ideology began to gain

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support by playing on the fears of people who believed their way of life was threatened by the growing numbers of immigrants. After the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 some American observers began to talk of the clash of civilisations between Islam and the West. The ideological genie had clearly not gone back into the bottle.