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IDEAS AND ETERNITY

Dissident intellectuals in the Soviet Union used to say, “an idea is a bullet.”¹ In a society so long ruled by the gun, the statement was eloquent testimony to the fear and power of something you cannot put your hands on—an idea.

The USSR, whose violent birth was midwived by the implementation of an idea—Marxism—nurtured an intelligentsia that affirmed the power of nonconforming ideas to penetrate armor. In history, ideas have penetrated cultural, linguistic, religious, as well as military barriers. Ideas have changed history long after they were thought to be dead, yet also died soon after they were thought to be revolutionary. Originating in unlikely places and repercussive in strange ways, ideas, if powerful, are unpredictable.

I

Ideas are sometimes discovered by two thinkers simultaneously, only for the renowned discoverers bitterly—and erroneously—to accuse each other of plagiarism. The significant mathematical breakthrough of the invention of the calculus, was made by Isaac Newton in 1664 through 1666. Newton, however, did not publish his findings. During that period, he corresponded with Leibniz, who, in 1675, published research on the same subject. There ensued an acrimonious and unbecoming debate on the priority of discovery; charges and counter-charges reverberated throughout Western Europe for decades. Only now, two centuries later, have scholars sorted out the documents to learn with certainty that each man discovered the calculus on his own.²

Not only debate, but sheer ignorance can plague claims of priority. When Theodor Herzl transformed European Jewry with his idea of

Besides his stellar intellectual honesty and the modesty with which he held his considerable learning, Walter Wurzburger had the capacity to reach people who were years and decades younger than he. This is one reason, among many, that *Tradition* flourished under his leadership. A cherished and true friend, he is deeply missed.

political Zionism in 1897, he did not know that thirty-five years earlier, Moses Hess, a one-time teacher of Karl Marx, had rethought his anti-nationalist, Communist position and issued a tract, "Rome and Jerusalem," which articulated many of the nationalist-Zionist ideas Herzl later took to be his own.³ Similarly, when Sigmund Freud elaborated (in German, in Vienna) upon a fundamental idea in modern psychology—the unconscious psyche—he did not know that one-half century earlier, R. Israel Salanter had already expounded a theory of the unconscious psyche (in Hebrew, in Vilna).⁴

Then there is the case of the anchoress at the Church of Norwich, the Renaissance man, and the contemporary sociologist. Dame Julian, a contemplative recluse in fourteenth-century England, Andrea Alciati, a writer of Emblem Books in sixteenth-century Italy, and Peter Berger, a sociologist in twentieth-century America, each of whom authored esteemed epigrammatic expressions of hope—"All shall be well," "Erit bene," "Everything is all right"—as universal reflexes of consolation and reassurance, welling up in the face of danger or defeat. There is no evidence that any one of these writers read the other (though T. S. Eliot, in one poem, lifted his epigram of hope straight from Julian).⁵ In Israel today, the phrase *yihyeh tov* ("it will turn out all right") crosses the lips in response to both small sufferings of life and the continuing quandary that is life in the Middle East. How do identical expressions of hope span cultures and centuries?

A variation on the question: How do similar ideas that are just different enough to nurture millennia-old debates arise at the same time? Why did preeminent founders of world religions arise within the span of a single century—Confucius in China, Budda in India, Zoroaster in Persia, the Prophet Ezekiel in Israel, Thales in Ionia, and Pythagoras in southern Italy?⁶

II

Sometimes the originator of an idea is perfectly clear, but its importance is not. Ideas can go underground, so to speak, only to reemerge decades or centuries later, becoming more influential than their authors ever imagined. Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher, set forth a notion in 1725 that is now so thoroughly absorbed into Western consciousness, it is hard to believe that it is little more than 275 years old. For all practical purposes however, Vico's notion—the uniqueness of cultures, the relativity of perception, language, and art—is little more

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than 175 years old. It lay untranslated and unknown until Jules Michelet, a French historian, popularized it more than a century after its appearance.⁷ Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard, now one of the most influential theologians in the West, died in Denmark in 1855, virtually unheard of outside Scandinavia for three-quarters of a century.

Just as an author's obscurity or certainty of failure is no indication of the ultimate fortune of his ideas, neither are notoriety and influence a guarantor of their enduring impact. By way of personal illustration, a survey I took of my American undergraduate students at The Hebrew University in the early 1980's revealed that fewer than two out of ten could identify Paul Goodman or Herbert Marcuse, two cultural heroes of American students just fifteen years earlier, and now, virtually forgotten.

Sometimes, artists, poets, and other peddlers of ideas foreshadow the future. Linguistic and cultural barriers do not halt the flow of inspiration. Heinrich Heine, writing in German in the 1830s, R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk, writing in Hebrew in the 1860s, Hillel Zeitlin, writing in Yiddish in the 1920s, and Czelaw Milosz, writing in Polish in the 1930s (to name but a few), all had a terrifying premonition of catastrophe in Europe. Most of these writers thought the disaster would engulf the Jews and would be caused by Germans.⁸ To say that brilliant thinkers predicted the Holocaust and thus to imply that it might have been prevented does not do justice to the murky and ultimately mysterious workings of those special minds cut loose from surface trappings of society, genuinely attuned to subterranean currents of ideas. Only with hindsight do we know which thinkers served as prophets; in Alasdair MacIntyre's paraphrase of Thomas Mann, as "seismographics in whose work tremors yet unobserved were registered."⁹

If ideas can foreshadow events, events can also pervert ideas. Events in the Soviet Union and other totalitarian countries enthralled some visiting Western intellectuals so thoroughly that even totalitarian bureaucrats were astonished at the gullibility of what one scholar derisively labeled the West's "political pilgrims."¹⁰ It seems that a sense of detachment from one's own society can not only attune one to its deepest rumblings, but can also induce a starry-eyed idealization of ideas at the foundation of other societies. Ideas, as bullets, can pierce not only armor, but good sense.

III

Then there are unintended consequence of ideas. Fate cannot only delay (Kierkegaard), confirm (Heine), or distort (political pilgrims) the

significance of an idea, but can turn it to exactly the opposite purpose for which it was originally intended. Malthus's studies on population growth and food production, for example, led to his pessimism on human survival and persuaded him to an anti-evolutionist perspective. But it was precisely Malthus's data that triggered Darwin's hypotheses on evolution. Another example: Edward Gibbon, with *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, sought to "enlarge the horizon of our intellectual view."¹¹ He succeeded precisely because his own historiographical powers of "intellectual enlargement"—theoretical generalization, causal patterning, and comparative analysis—were blessedly weak and underplayed. Blessedly, for "his style and idea of literary excellence enabled him to present his facts" with great artistry, virtually unencumbered by outdated theory. Gibbon's own idea was to deliver a work of historical depth; the unintended consequence of his failure to do so was to rescue *The Decline and Fall* from becoming hopelessly dated. "It is an ironic measure of Gibbon's greatness that both his abilities and his limitations ultimately functioned to insure the enduring appeal of his history"¹²—still readable some two centuries after it was written.

Related to but not coextensive with the phenomenon of an idea's unintended consequences is the "intentional fallacy." Here, although an idea is remembered as it was intended, the idea's creator is remembered for what he would consider the wrong reason. R. Joseph Karo (sixteenth century) is remembered primarily for what became the most influential of all codifications of Jewish law, *Shulhan Arukh*. Perhaps this is how he would have wanted it, but contrary evidence begs consideration of the impermanency of intentions in which intellectuals invest so much hope and reap so much frustration. This evidence is the testimony of R. Karo's life. He dedicated over thirty years to another work, a monumental digest and review of post-Talmudic literature, *Beit Yosef*. In contrast, *Shulhan Arukh*—short, spare, unadorned—was composed as if in the wink of an eye. Karo's immense digest—the idea governing his life's work—is studied almost exclusively by scholars, while his other idea, the compact code, carried his name across the centuries.

IV

How do intellectuals explain the movement of ideas? Carl Jung, the psychologist, spoke of a collective unconscious, a pool of latent, universal archetypes waiting to find expression in symbols, art, and speech.¹³ Carl Becker, the historian, spoke of "climates of opinions," which con-

dition the assumptions—the unarticulated agreements—present in every age.¹⁴ Friedrich Schelling, the German Romantic thinker, spoke of artists' vivid receptivity—their special intuition—that confers a prescient vision of things to come.¹⁵

There is some truth in all of these claims, even more in that of the British intellectual, Isaiah Berlin. "No one has yet convincingly demonstrated that the human imagination obeys discoverable laws."¹⁶ The ways in which ideas germinate, pollinate, and imbed themselves across time and culture will forever remain unpredictable. That ideas generate terrible quandaries and sublime achievements should give pause to political oppressors, economic determinists, behavioral psychologists, and other would-be controllers of the human imagination who question the irrepressible power of ideas.

So much for the human imagination.

What about the Divine?

There are two alternatives. Either God has a well-developed and somewhat perverse sense of humor, or, He has a message. Look at what He does to our best intellectual intentions. They may turn out to be powerful, but in a way we would not like. They may be worthy of great attention, but not receive it (or receive it after we are dead, unable to enjoy it). Or, they may be unworthy of great attention, but receive it, convincing us that we are seminal thinkers, when, in fact, we shall end up as a footnote, if that. We may set forth an original idea, only to learn (or, perhaps, never to learn) that someone else thought of it, too. So it goes. God plays tricks with our best ideas, abandoning them to vagaries of resonance, misappropriation, and impotence.

Or, alternatively, God has a message.

Since no one can stake a claim to control posterity's vision of the originality, importance, or nature of one's ideas, they have to be pursued for their own sake. The message from Eternity, so to speak, is that it is futile to identify rewards—to maintain expectations—for ideas. History reveals the fate of ideas to be fickle. We can stake our mind and honor on them only because we believe them to be right. We can work to perfect and disseminate them only because their truth demands the effort. We can commit ourselves to their rigorous elaboration and scrutiny because God wants our dedication to principle, not posterity. It is a paradox; history reveals that Eternity requires intellectual dedication to the here-and-now.

So much for Divine imagination. What about Divine revelation?

If history reveals that humanly wrought ideas require dedication for

their own sake, how much more so with Divinely wrought ideas. To expect to witness the ultimate reward for the dissemination of Torah is not merely futile but sacrilegious. It is to presume on God. True, He promises a transfiguration of human society, Jewish and Gentile, as reward for our dedication to His ideas. But who are we to know to what extent our humanly wrought, intellectual contribution to the Divine scheme approximates His truth? Even if we are authentic Torah scholars and pietists, how are we to know how our finite contribution fits His infinite pattern? We know that Divine ideas will triumph; we do not know how our dedication will affect the final consummation. We must acquire and disseminate Divine ideas for their own sake—for Eternity's sake. If we do, our humanly wrought ideas will approximate the Divine ideas, unifying our intellectual life.

This is the ultimate reward and justification—the unification of life. It surpasses anything posterity could promise.

NOTES

1. Interview with David K. Shipler (Jerusalem, 1982), *New York Times* correspondent in Russia, 1976-1980. Shipler built on his years in Russia to publish *Russia: Broken Idol Solemn Dreams* (New York: 1983).
2. A. Rupert Hall, *Philosophers at War: The Quarrel Between Newton and Leibniz* (New York: 1980).
3. On Herzl's ignorance, see Lucy Dawidowicz, *The Golden Tradition* (New York: 1967), 51; Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: 1979), 245-6. On Hess, see Berlin, "The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess," *Against the Current*, 213-51; Edmund Silberner, *Moses Hess: Geschichte seines Lebens* (Leiden: Brill, 1966); Shlomo Avineri, *Moses Hess: Prophet of Communism and Zionism* (New York: 1985).
4. Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter: Text Structure, Idea—The Ethics and Theology of an Early Psychologist of the Unconscious* (New York: 1982); idem, "An Early Psychologist of the Unconscious," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (April-June 1982).
5. Ruth Casper, "Prototypical Symbols of Hope," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Jan-March, 1981). T. S. Eliot's poem is "Little Gidding," *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: 1963), 205-6.
6. Robert Nisbet, "Teggart of Berkeley," in *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers*, ed. Joseph Epstein (New York: 1981).
7. Berlin, *Against the Current*, 119.
8. On Heine, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: 1966), 219; on R. Meir Simha, see *Meshekh Hokhma* (1927), Leviticus 26:44, s.v. *ve-af gam zot*; on Zeitlin, see *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Jerusalem,

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- 1972, vol. 16, s.v. "Hillel Zeitlin," by Symcha Bunim Urbach; Milosz: Russel Schoch, "Poet Laureate," *California Monthly* (Dec. 1980), 7.
9. MacIntyre, *Short History*, 226.
 10. Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba* (New York: 1981).
 11. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 5, ed. J. B. Bury (London: 1929), 258.
 12. All quotes on Gibbon are from Martine Watson Brownley, "Gibbon's Artistic and Historical Scope in the Decline and Fall," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Oct-Dec 1981).
 13. C.G. Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," in *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, vol. 15 of the *Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (New York: 1966), 80-81.
 14. Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: 1932).
 15. Isaiah Berlin, "A Remarkable Decade: The Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia," *Russian Thinkers* (New York: 1979).
 16. Berlin, *Against the Current*, 353.