

Ideas

Nicholas Rescher

Stage Setting

Over and above the treatment of ideas in everyday discourse, or the cartoonish treatment of ideas via illuminated light-bulbs, there is a philosophical tradition on the subject going back to Plato. This philosophical conception has it that ideas are cognitive resources distinct from the things of this world, but which these things are related in ways that can establish a conceptual or even ontological linkage between them. It is this view of ideas that the present discussion sets out to examine and explain in greater detail than is usually bestowed upon it.

At the core of these deliberations is a new way of looking at ideas. Its approach is not, strictly speaking, historical (exegetical) but rather envisions a conceptual reconstruction—a way of treating the matter both answers to the basic aims and essential conditions of the traditional conception, but also achieves the sort of clarity and precision characteristic of contemporary discussions of cognitive issues. So what is at issue here is not so much a restoration of earlier conceptions of ideas but a renovation which seeks to put new and hopefully palatable wine into old and familiar bottles.

The Idea Idea

We all have our conceptions of things—elm trees, elephants, numbers, But these are idiosyncratically person differentiated. Above and beyond such actual conceptions are there also *ideas* that that is, perfected conceptions represent how things should properly and correctly be conceptualized: how they would be conceptualized in a perfected systematization of our knowledge. On this present, quasi-technical conception of the matter, the *idea* of something is the correct conception of it, the conception that gets all of its essential features right. Ideas are thus *correct* conceptions. And our conceptions are to *ideas* as our actual beliefs are to *the definitive truth*. In both cases alike the issue is one of idealization: something we believe in, but which eludes our cognitive grasp. In general we do not have (i.e., know) the idea of things, their *correct* conception. Our approximations are too rough and ready for us to make this claim.

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We presume that there is such a thing, but cannot actually manage to specify it.

Like Plato's ideas, the presently envisioned conception thereof plays a constructive role. However, with Plato the contrast was ontological, contrasting the imperfect beds or men of this world with the idealized models of another. But on the present construal the contrast is epistemological—comprising the imperfect conceptions of things that we actually have with the perfected version there would be under ideal circumstances.

Partial Access: Correct Description vs. Correct Conception

It must be stressed that there is a significant and substantial difference between a true or correct *contention* on the one hand, and a true or correct *conception* on the other. To make a true contention about a thing we merely need to get one particular fact about it straight. To have a true conception of the thing, on the other hand, we must get all of the important facts about it straight. And it is clear that this involves a certain normative element—namely what the “important” or “essential” facets of something are. Anaximander of Miletus presumably made many correct contentions about the sun in the fifth century B.C.—for example, that its light is brighter than that of the moon. But Anaximander's conception of the sun (as the flaming spoke of a great wheel of fire encircling the earth) was totally wrong.

Idealization is of course a procedure familiar from many other fields: art, politics, and architecture included. It pivots on the contrast between what we do or can actually have and what we might ideally and unrealizably like to have. And this conception applies in the cognitive realm as well. It is familiar for the juridical “truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” And it holds for ideas as well, along the lines of the construal presently at issue.

Crucial to these present deliberations about ideas is the contrast between a descriptive *characterization* of something and a judgmental *conceptualization* of it. To *characterize* a thing correctly we simply need to provide a true fact about it. (“Sunday is the day before Monday” is a perfectly correct descriptive characterization of that day.) However to *conceptualize* something correctly is to provide for the essential facts about

it. (Something like “Monday is the first day of the week and functions as the Christian day of worship” would need to be said.)

To assure the correctness of our conception of a thing we would have to be sure—as we very seldom are—that nothing further can possibly come along to upset our view of just what its definitive features are and just what their character is. Thus, the qualifying conditions for true conceptions are far more demanding than those for true claims. With a correct contention about a thing, all is well if we get the single relevant aspect of it right, but with a correct conception of it we must get the essentials right—we must have an overall picture that is basically correct. And this is something we generally cannot ascertain, if only because we cannot say with secure confidence what actually is really important or essential before the end of the proverbial day.

We can doubtless know many facts about things. And doubtless some of the facts we know about something is essential to it. Correct *description* is no problem. But correct conception is something else again. Having a correct concept calls for getting all the essential facts about it right. (The essential properties are those without which a thing would not be the thing it is.

Totality is the problem here. For to have a correct *conception* we must get all the essential facts right. And this is often in principle impossible. (The difference between *characterizing* something correctly and *conceptualizing* it correctly.)

In particular cases, however, we treat our conceptions as correct. We treat what we actually have as surrogate for what we would fain have but cannot quite secure. Since we naturally regard new beliefs as true and our conceptions as correct, our conceptions of things play, for us, the role of ideas: we see our conceptions as idea-surrogates.

What we think to be true, our *putative* truth, is our surrogate for the actual truth. Our conceptions are the best we can achieve in the line of ideas. “Don’t just tell me what you *think* to be true—tell me what actually is true.” Is a challenge we cannot meet. And so is the injunction: “Don’t just talk to me about your *conception* of X, tell me what the correct conception of X is—the idea of it.” We realize full well that there is a potential gap at work here, it is just that we cannot put our finger on the exact nature of it.

The Aspect Of Idealization

The *idea* of something encapsulates the definitive truth about it—the truth that gets all the essentials of the matter right. And this is already an idealization. It puts realization of the ideas of things beyond our reach. Usually we don't even know what the essential features of something are, let alone have a complete cognate access to them.

Ideas are idealizations. As such they cannot be emplaced into the spatiotemporal order of actual objects. In particular, they do not have a place in some sort of space or regime or domain. Like descriptions they are abstractions that preclude being located somewhere. (Like shapes and quantities they can be of something spatiotemporal but are not themselves of this kind.)

Nor yet are ideas somehow in the head—they are not thoughts or sentiments. They are *sui generis*—their own sort of idealized thing, that cannot be attached or assimilated to more familiar things belonging to more accepted categories. There is no “where” or “when” to their existence any more than there is to the existence of shapes or numbers.

And the same can be said for attempts to place ideas into some sort of realm of region—a world of ideas. There is no spatial, political, or social dimension to ideas, any more than there is to shapes or numbers or punctuation marks. Nor yet numbers.

How then do objects relate to ideas? The answer is that they suggest or indicate them. The idea of a number is to the number as the alphabetic inscription of a word is to the word itself.

The Atemporality Of Ideas

To ask the question “When do Ideas Originate” is to plunge into error. For ideas are not temporal. They do not have a place in the time order. One cannot ask when they begin or when they will end. They are not thoughts (although one can think about them). You can get at an idea by thinking about it—but the thought is not the idea; the idea here is what the thought is about, not the thought itself. Thoughts, the correlates of thinking, occur as space and time. This does not hold for ideas.

The ideas of the world's concrete things are outside our reach. We do not realize ideas because our descriptions remain incomplete. We can always learn more and deeper facts about concrete objects and their natural kinds. As regards the real things of this world there is certainly the prospect of the ever-enlarged understanding of them. More information about their essential nature remains ever in prospect. Are there ideas of individual particulars (concreta)? Is there a Napoleon idea/concept? Not at all.

There are certainly *conceptions* of Napoleon—yours, mine, the Duke of Wellington's. But there is no *idea* of Napoleon—no definitive characterization that yours or mine can be said to aspire to.

But if concrete particulars do not engender definitive concepts (ideas) then what does?

To begin with, works of human artifice admit of idea in the present sense.

For the object of fictions are just exactly (and only) what their creators put into them. This is how they are defined—and everything about them is consequently evidential. When you have what the author means you have the idea. The prime exceptions are fictions. Arthur Conan Doyle tells us all the essential facts about Sherlock Holmes. There are, of course, further facts—e.g., that you or I are now thinking and talking about him. But these are inessential. It is not, however, the case with fictions. These have a finite cognitive depth. There is only so much that can be said about them. Take the Easter Rabbit. What you can correctly say about it will fit onto a single page. Or take Sherlock Holmes. All that can be said about him is what was said in the Conan Doyle stories. (To be sure people's reactions to this can be prolonged *ad indefinitum*, but this describes Holmes no more than your opinion of me describes me.)

And this situation with regard to fictions hold also of works of art, i.e., Beethoven IX. The object is what its creator provides. And its idea is encapsulated therein.

Moreover, the same holds once more for hypothetical postulations. Let it be that someone proposes the hypothesis "Suppose a large, white rabbit were sitting on yonder stool." Whatever can be truly said of it is inherent in this hypothesis. We get the idea.

The fact is that throughout the realm of human artifice we are in control. Correctness and completeness are actionable—indeed automatic. But with nature's realm the situation is quite different. Here the idea idea

cannot be implemented for want of the requisite completeness.

In this regard the situation is very non-Platonic—in effect reverses the Platonic conception. But beyond particulars there are also generalizes—types of things about them?

Category Mistakes

When, where, and how did the idea of carbon originate? Did it exist in the first nanosecond of the universe, where there were as yet no carbon atoms? Did it originate when humans discovered that there was such a thing as carbon?

All of these questions make no viable sense. They are all fallacies in being predicated in the false and untenable presupposing that an idea such as that of carbon is somehow spatiotemporal. They are on the order of asking for the color of triangularity or the origination-time of the number 3. All such questions are based on erroneous presupposing. Numbers (unlike plants) are not the sort of things that have color. Numbers (unlike butterflies) are not the sort of thing that have an origin. It makes no sense to temporalize ideas—or to ask when and how they originated. We cannot ask if the idea of gold antedated the conception of gold by humans.

The endeavor to emplace ideas in the space-time order of actual things is also pre-ordained to failure. The factor of idealization places ideas outside the framework of space-time. It makes no sense to spatialize ideas—to contemplate a region or world of ideas. They simply are not the sorts of things that have locations in this or any other realm of things. To claim otherwise is to commit the mistake of applying to and not of thing conceptions that only hold elsewhere. Trees have size, but odors do not. Animals have age but numbers do not. To think of ideas in spatiotemporal terms (asking about their age or location) is a category mistake on the order of inquiry what the color of numbers or the shape of forgetfulness.

In the sense now at issue *ideas* do not admit patio-temporal characterization. They neither originate nor prevail nor yet have “existence” in some domain of their own. Their mode of being does not fall into the usual range of consideration. Like mathematical operations such as subtraction or division you cannot assign to them a spatial location nor yet ask when they originated in time. They are not eternal or sempiternal—they are literally timeless; even as poems not omni-present or all-pervasive, but are spaceless. Time and space neither includes nor excludes them. By their very nature they lie beyond the temporal pale. To

think of them in spatiotemporal terms is to make a category mistake on the order of inquiring into the shape or color of a legal right.

The Purposive Aspect: The Validation Of Ideas

Abstractions though they are, ideas have a right and proper place in the scheme of things. They are thought tools, instrumentalities of thinking. They have a use and have a productive role to play. They are contrast conceptions that preclude our ascribing to our knowledge a completeness that it does not possess. And they are regulative ideals—incentives that enjoy the deepening of our knowledge.

In personal thought and interpersonal discourse alike we use personally accessible devices to refer to impersonally transcendental conditions which idealization puts at our disposal. Ideals thus atone for unrealism through utility.

Cognitive idealizations on the order of “the actual truth” and “the correct conception” are not really things to whose possession we can lay decisive claims. Nevertheless they serve significant purposes and have important functions. Most important in this regard is their role as *contrast conceptions* serving us as reminders that there is a real and significant gap between what is to have (namely *putative* knowledge) and what we would ideally like to have (namely certain and categorically assured knowledge).

Meaningful discourse requires commitment to the common, storied and impersonal conception. If in discourse situations we were telling only of our own personal conceptions, we could not agree or disagree, nor yet transfer information.

Communication requires a commonality of concern. If my claims were about *my* conception and yours about *yours* there would be no discursive contact, we would never agree or disagree about things. To communicate we have to subscribe to the contention—or perhaps if you prefer—that we are talking about the same things. It is not about the real conceptions we have, but what the ideal commonality—that idealized main object—that we must purport to be talking. However different our conceptions of it may be, there has to be a purported commonality. And this is pointed out not by our conception of things but by the ideas that which we connectively subscribe. Without the commonality of ideas discourse communication would not be possible.

For here our subscription to an idealized idea-idea is crucial in enabling us to effect the communicatively indispensable transit from an

available but personalized view of reality to an idealized intersubjective commonality.

The idealization at issue thus finds its validating justification on a strictly pragmatic basis—for on the present conception of ideas they provide an instrumental resource without which an indispensable function—interpersonal communication—would not be manageable.

Nicholas Rescher, University of Pittsburg, USA