

IDEAS: IMPERATIVE FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Human welfare depends on ideas. The range is impressive, from meditation to medication and everything in between. The germ theory of disease to the notion that speciation is a consequence of natural selection to the theory of computation to the grand unified theories of the origin of the universe to the notion that the mind and the body are a unity and that they interact and influence each other—all are ideas which have consequences for the well being of people. Over human history, some humans have had ideas on how to do things based on discoveries they or their forbearers made. As the stock of ideas grew, so did the ability of humans to create stuff out of available raw materials increased. Ideas have the peculiar characteristic in that their stock does not diminish from use. Economists call this property “*non-rival in consumption.*” Ideas multiply the ability of humans to achieve whatever it is that human’s desire. The world we live in is one constructed by human will using raw materials—and ideas. What human will can achieve is only limited by the ideas that are available to humans at any point in time. Since there can be no conceivable limit to how large the stock of ideas can become, there is no conceivable limit to what human will can achieve. To put it another way, every artifact of human endeavor is basically embodied ideas. Each individual human life is limited compared to the extended lifetime of human society. No person is smart enough to evolve all the ideas from scratch. Fortunately, each human can potentially take from the stock whatever is best suited to his or her own predilections and build on it.

There is a monotonic increase in the stock of ideas, which of course means that humans collectively know more today than they used to know at any previous time. The wisest person of a thousand years ago did not have access to the stock of ideas that even the average person has today. Every object and every institution originated as an idea in some mind. And then it spread to others. It is a marketplace of ideas out there and over time, ideas that confer advantages to those who adopt and use them, survive. The more ideas that enter the ionosphere, the more advantage it confers to humans collectively. The

sages who composed the *Rig Veda* recognized this and proclaimed a few thousand years ago, “*Let noble thoughts come to us from all universe.*”

Ideas are dangerous. They are dangerous because they are harbingers of change which structurally alters society. Those who have a vested interest in the *status quo* therefore resist new ideas which would dethrone them from their privileged positions that depend on inferior ideas. It is natural for them to prohibit the emergence of ideas however good it may be to general welfare. To secure their own position, therefore, the strategy adopted is to proclaim that their ideas are the most perfect ones and all other ideas are verboten. Indeed, their insistence on the prohibition of any new ideas is a sure sign that they are not entirely convinced of the superiority of their own ideas. If they were so certain of the perfection of their ideas, they would have welcomed competing ideas. Those who are against new ideas are the ones who are afraid that their own ideas are worthless. New ideas, especially those that fundamentally restructure human society, pose the greatest threat to those who have little trust in themselves. One test of a potentially good new idea is to note whether it is opposed by those in power. Burning at the stake, sending people off to gulags, banning books, etc, are time-tested methods of suppressing valuable ideas that threaten the worthless in power.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), was an Italian philosopher and astronomer/astrologer, burned at the stake as a heretic, regarded by some as a martyr to the cause of freedom of thought because his ideas went against the Church doctrine. Ideas inspire fear. Bruno while receiving his sentence told the Inquisitor, “Perhaps you, my judges, pronounce this sentence against me with greater fear than I receive it.” This explains why, for instance, the Catholic Church burnt Giordano Bruno at the stake in 1600 CE after incarcerating him for eight years.

Societies that encourage the generation of new ideas within and welcome ideas from abroad prosper. The development and growth of societies mirror that of ideas. Institutions, machines, buildings, markets, and a million other things are nothing but embodied ideas. Ideas arise in human minds. They have to be expressed for them to be conveyed to other human minds. That immediately means that if there are limits placed on the freedom of expression, the increase in the stock of ideas will be curtailed. Worse yet, the good ideas which invariably threaten powerful vested interests will be prohibited

and society will lose. The development and growth of an economy depends on the generation and adoption of good ideas, which in turn depends on the freedom to express ideas. Thus there should not be any limits placed on the freedom of expression for the very practical reason that that freedom has an instrumental role in promoting the development of an economy.

To some, absolute freedom of expression may seem like too much to grant. “Yes, but, shouldn’t there be some limits on what could be expressed?” they may ask. My response is, “Who defines those limits?” Surely the powerful will define those limits, whether individuals or collectives. The record of the powerful in the past when it comes to defining limits has been dismal. Just two examples from the past: the Catholic Church and the communists. Every good idea was resisted by those two.

In India, the freedom of expression is severely curtailed. The government is deathly afraid that the truth will come out. Banning of books is only part of the story. The larger story is about what is called “official secrets” which basically shields the powerful from the scrutiny of the people. Politically unpopular views don’t get to see the light of the day. The government censors and prohibits publication of ideas under the guise of “national security.”

Development of an economy is dependent on absolute freedom of expression. According to George Bernard Shaw: ***“If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas”***.

But people at large will ever learn to value this freedom? Most people would rather continue with their religion of fear where any dissent is blasphemy. Irreverence is a healthy attitude but few people have it. Again, freedom of expression should not be confused with wide exposure of your ideas. One can get wide exposure of its ideas, if the timing is right. Naturally one needs to put constraints on this or any other freedom: ***only those constraints which enable everyone to exercise their freedom***. One can not impede your freedom in exercising its own freedom. Any other constraint is uncalled for. And in a manner of speaking they are not constraints, because they are logically necessitated by the concept of a freedom. The fewer constraints that are placed on free speech are the better. Limits designed to protect people are easier to justify than those that aim in some

way to control thinking such as laws on blasphemy, obscenity and Holocaust-denial. So, this test for “goodness” of an idea is not sufficient. For example if a new secret brotherhood propagates the idea that every white/black man above the age of 60 should be killed, then those in power would definitely oppose it. And obviously, it does not make the idea a good one.

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes: Freedom of the press and other media; freedom to receive or impart information or ideas; freedom of artistic creativity; and academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research. Look at China and how it is gagging freedom of expression. Blocking Google to its people is a glaring example. Google’s launch of a self-censoring Chinese search engine is the latest in a string of examples of global Internet companies caving in to pressure from the Chinese government. The service curtails the rights of Chinese Internet users to the freedom of expression and freedom of information enjoyed in other countries. Microsoft launched a portal in China that blocks use of words such as ‘freedom’ in blogs text. The company closed down the blogs of Zhao Jing, who supported a strike against the politically-motivated sacking of an editor at the Beijing News. Yahoo has admitted revealing email account details of the journalist to the Chinese authorities, who was peacefully exercising his right to impart information, a move that contributed to his prosecution and sentencing to 10 years in prison. Look at America history of protecting the freedom of expression and democracy: During close to 200 years, the United States expelled or mostly exterminated the indigenous population, that many millions of people, conquered half of Mexico, carried out depredations all over the region, Caribbean and Central America, sometimes beyond, conquered Hawaii and the Philippines, killing several 100,000 Filipinos in the process. Since the Second World War, it has extended its reach around the world in ways. But it was always killing someone else, the fighting was somewhere else, it was others who were getting slaughtered. Not in the US. Not the national territory. India does not believe in invasions in the name of installing democracies, freedom of expression, liberty and shallowed things like that Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Philippines, Haiti, Guatemala and the list goes on. Often, the US atrocities on the world nations grows bigger and bigger. The history of Europe is even more horrendous than the US. The US is an offshoot of Europe, basically. For hundreds of years, Europe has been

casually slaughtering people all over the world. That how they conquered the world, not by handing out candy to babies. The main sport of Europe for hundreds of years was slaughtering one another. The only reason that it came to an end in 1945, was it had nothing to do with Democracy or not making war with each other and other fashionable notions. It had to do with the fact that everyone understood that the next time they play the game it was going to be the end for the world. Because the Europeans, including us, had developed such massive weapons of destruction that that game just have to be over.