

Idealism Is Different From Ideology

Some people and organizations feel they have to make a choice between idealism and dry pragmatism. There are a lot of reasons for this, but one of them is the false equivalency of idealistic behavior and ideological behavior.

To be idealistic is to strive for the good, the just, the beautiful. Idealists aim for a better future that is more aligned with those ultimate values.

When I think about ideology, I think about a different set of behaviors:

Ideology, n. a system of ideas and ideals, especially one that forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy.

People with an ideology (more often than not*) to have this totalizing system of ideas about both 1) the specific state of affairs that constitutes the good and 2) how to achieve the good.

Do not confuse idealists and ideologues.

The ideologue generally feels sure that she has arrived at the final, complete system of thought. She has a both a very specific idea of how the world should look (and how people should act) to embody her very specific idea of what the good can be. She is insistent upon the ends, but she is just as insistent upon the means. The revolution must happen according to plan, and there is no room for deviation or heresy. Ever heard of “ideological purity tests”? The ideologue cares a lot more about being right and a lot more about being on the right team.

The idealist knows truth, goodness, and beauty by sight – but she also recognizes it when she sees it in forms she did not expect. She realizes she cannot control or box in the good. She realizes that the achievable good is improvement, not perfection. She realizes she may be wrong about the specific steps it takes to achieve the good, and she is willing to revise as she gains more information. She’s OK with doing that because she cares more about the good than about being right about the good.

Sure, there are a lot of ideologues in the world. But you don’t have to become them.

Seek truth, goodness, and beauty, but don’t ever close yourself off to the data of reality as the ideological people do. Seek the grounding feedback of the world around you, but never give up on the goals that make a struggle worthwhile – as the pragmatists do.

**People with ideologies are not bad, and they do not always treat their ideologies as totalizing life systems.*