How Much Do Ideas Matter, Really?

One of the largest problems I have with Ayn Rand is similar to my problems with Stefan Molyneux and many other thinkers/philosophers … and saying this will enrage any objectivist, Molyneuvian, and many other people who believe philosophy is at the root of issues. Ideas aren't that relevant in changing the world.

I believe that we often observe reverse causation when we see the link between civilization and philosophy. Philosophers are more often the piper for culture, economics and politics … the incentives pick the tune. When conditions are ripe for humans to flourish (property rights, weak central authority, open trade, etc) humans flourish … years or centuries into this process we start seeing philosophers assert themselves to the front of the parade and act like they were leading it. They weren't.

I know many libertarians who have claimed to value liberty as a primary value. They don't. None of them. If they did, they would move to the place that affords them maximum liberty no matter the cost. They don't do this because they are creatures of incentives not creatures of ideas. We are all creatures of incentives. We live in the place where our family is, our jobs are, our girlfriend is and where the language and culture are most familiar. Our ideas and our liberty is one factor for our choices, in the extremes, it can be a major factor. However, outside of the extremes, liberty isn't even very high on the list.

I don't desire to say ideas are irrelevant. They aren't. They are incredibly helpful and meaningful to everyone in their own lives. They can inspire us and refine our methods, goals and individual purpose. It just isn't a prime causal factor in how society operates.

Society will change as the incentives change. Practical arguments for liberty won't change this. Moral arguments for liberty won't change this. My suggestion to the people who value liberty … maximize your own happiness and be a distant observer.