

Old Ideas

"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing sporadically, by Verbal Vol.

Recently I encountered a compendium of smart (mostly) commentary entitled "This Idea Must Die: Theories That Are Blocking Progress" from Edge.org. The book itself is a collection of answers from luminaries in many fields regarding the 2014 Edge Question, to wit,

Science advances by discovering new things and developing new ideas. Few truly new ideas are developed without abandoning old ones first. As theoretical physicist Max Planck (1858-1947) noted, "A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it." In other words, science advances by a series of funerals. Why wait that long?

WHAT SCIENTIFIC IDEA IS READY FOR RETIREMENT?

Ideas change, and the times we live in change. Perhaps the biggest change today is the rate of change. What established scientific idea is ready to be moved aside so that science can advance?

There are 175 essays in this compilation. Some answers come from personal favorites such as Matt Ridley and Daniel Dennett, others from *bête noirs* such as Steven Pinker and Sam Harris. But they are all incentive to thought.

The book actually addresses areas of science, but is to be appreciated for a rather broad view of science (I admit I have a limited appetite for quantum physics, but a howling hunger for philosophy and economics).

One of the paths that I am wandering now, from this inspiration, is to consider disposable ideas from the view of a voluntarist. There follow some ideas for which I would suggest early retirement.

- **Ideas are immortal** — although there are many ideas that have lived throughout Western Civilization, and which give no indication of disappearing anytime soon, we need to apply and re-apply a reasonable test for currency on all ideas. Is the idea of prohibition worthwhile? Do two and two make four? How about alchemy and *phlogiston*?
- **Settled science** — the settling of things is not what science does. Science asks ever new questions, and then explores feasibility.
- **The survival of the fittest** — Too many action-oriented people see this as kill or be killed. In probability, we as individuals are not equipped to even guess what the definition of “fit” is, much less the meaning of survival. In an older sense, often blamed on Charles Darwin, we see male animals contesting for the right to dominate both females and males in his following. From this angle, a kind of Noah’s Ark angle, the world would be a vast place with only various animations of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. But alas, the genetic algorithm is complex to a degree that forbids prediction. Tardigrades are far more likely to produce the future of intelligence than are *homo sapiens*.
- **Random means what you think it means** — In statistics random means of or characterizing a process of selection in which each item of a set has an equal probability of being chosen. Many folks use the word today to mean an unexpected intrusion into one’s space.
- **Darwinism** — first, there is no belief system properly described as Darwinism. Darwin’s theories are not part of a belief system. One can either demonstrate proper examples of Darwin’s theory or one cannot. Believing anything about them is fanciful.
- **Anarchism** — there is also no belief system properly described as anarchism. Anarchy is a noun that means, etymologically, “no leader,” in effect no consensus boss. Anarchy has rules, laws, structure, and hierarchy, among other things.
- **Ideas need institutions** — Over 50 years ago they had an idea that expressway traffic between Louisville and Southern Indiana could be a dream. It has been a jungle of orange barrels every single day since.
- **Know means Know** — Socrates reportedly said that he was the wisest man in Athens because he knew nothing. Plato followed that with the Allegory of the Cave, in which our opportunity to know anything was severely limited by constraints on human perceptivity. Nowadays, however, everybody is the World’s Foremost Authority. The thing that Socrates recognized is that what we think we know is very different than what we actually know. I know that I overslept this morning. I can only guess where the ripples from that fact will flow. We ought to discount the use, whenever we encounter it, of the phrase “I know,” because in each case north of 99% of all cases there is no “know,” there is only hearsay, assumption, and indoctrination.
- **Time is a thing** — Time is a relative quality. Events are things. Being “on time” means only that you have previously agreed with one or more people to attend an event. It is a measurement of voluntary self-control in a sea of timelessness.

- **Good, bad, ugly, beautiful. good, evil** — The idea that everything is binary, true or false, is itself a false binary idea. One of the great advancements of society was democracy as founded by Pericles of Athens. This converted previous multifarious indecision into binary decision making based on a measurement of a defined crowd, taken from its individuals. It has been abused in every way imaginable on every day since.
- **Rights Be** — The idea of human rights originates in class warfare. Some have said that might makes right when might only makes might. In the old days, rights were used to figure out who lived on the “right” (as in correct) side of the tracks. Many people today still insist on their rights. They will imprison themselves in a fenced-off category, then declare that they have some “rights” thereby. As an example, a person may claim to have a right to healthcare, when they may mean 1) that a well-intentioned society will bring the threatened violence of the state to bear on anyone who denies such healthcare (without actually defining healthcare — who, what, when, where, why, how much, how many, how soon, how done), or 2) illness should never happen (without defining illness). Nobody has a right to the suspension of natural occurrences, nor do they have a right to compel anyone to tend to them.
- **Call the police** — No problems get solved by calling the police.
- **Call the feds** — No problems get solved by calling the feds.
- **The policeman is your friend** — Get down on the ground! At least three things are happening here. The police forces themselves are more and more incompetent on average, which is to say that the police forces themselves are spread too thin, for far too many laws. The local police, who used to be your friend, dependent on your goodwill, are now co-opted and dependent on the federal government. Incompetency, excessive legislation, and co-optation by the Feds.
- **The government is here to ensure my druthers** — The state is not a Make-a-Wish organization. People will actually say to me that the government’s function is to protect them. From *what*? Unfortunately, too many think that means the right to live with only the people of whom they approve. They want to call down the government’s violence to make them happy. I have never had a day in my life that the state, in one guise or another, did not steal more from me than any other combination of criminals.
- **Assertion is evidence** — No it’s not. Assertion is a speculation. Evidence is evidence.
- **Anybody I disagree with is a snowflake** — Many snowflakes last longer than people who defy the laws of nature. And certainly no ideology is any more snowflakey than any other. Wanting to have your *derrière* kissed, enforced by the state, is socialism (snowflakery).
- **Reality shows are about reality** — Grow up. Neither is professional wrestling faked.
- **The government’s pomp and circumstance is free** — Like all of the inaugurations? Who pays then?
- **You can give the government the power to do good without also giving it the power to do bad - in fact, to do anything it wants** — Give me an example. (Hat

tip to Harry Browne, who said ***you can't***).

- **We are a beehive/anthill species** — This is an insult to bees and ants everywhere. Goals, purpose, rationality, and individual distinction — not necessarily goodness — are the hallmarks of humans.
- **There is someone among us who can tell what a good collective goal would be** — Who?
- **Mark Twain was just a humorist** — Humor does not preclude profundity. It's OK to believe that Mark Twain was just a joker, but that in no way detracts from his universal perspective.
- **Kurt Vonnegut was just a sci-fi writer** — A fictional setting does not cloak truth. Science fiction is not a curtain over the cloak. *Aficionados* of Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, and Neil Stephenson know whereof I speak.

These are enough to think about today, but just remember, we will never run out of scared and lazy folks who believe they can have someone else to do their thinking for them. And we will never run out of egotists who cannot resist telling others what to do.

I'll join you again with these and other ideas like them. Stay tuned.