

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

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## THE SHRINKING WORLD OF IDEAS

*Neuroscience Is Ruining the Humanities*

Arthur Krystal

We have shifted our focus from the meaning of ideas to the means by which they're produced.

When professors began using critical theory to teach literature they were, in effect, committing suicide by theory.

When, in 1942, Lionel Trilling remarked, “What gods were to the ancients at war, ideas are to us,” he suggested a great deal in a dozen words. Ideas were not only higher forms of existence, they, like the gods, could be invoked and brandished in one’s cause. And, like the gods, they could mess with us. In the last century, Marxism, Freudianism, alienation, symbolism, modernism, existentialism, nihilism, deconstruction, and postcolonialism enflamed the very air that bookish people breathed. To one degree or another, they lit up, as Trilling put it, “the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.”

Trilling belonged to a culture dominated by New York Intellectuals, French writers, and British critics and philosophers, most of whom had been marked by the Second World War and the charged political atmosphere of the burgeoning Cold War. Nothing seemed

more crucial than weighing the importance of individual freedom against the importance of the collective good, or of deciding which books best reflected the social consciousness of an age when intellectual choices could mean life or death. And because of this overarching concern, the interpretation of poetry, fiction, history, and philosophy wasn't just an exercise in analysis but testified to one's moral view of the world.



“It was as if we didn't know where we ended and books began,” Anatole Broyard wrote about living in Greenwich Village around midcentury. “Books were our weather, our environment, our clothing. We didn't simply read books; we became them.” Although Broyard doesn't specify which books, it's a good bet that he was referring mainly to novels, for in those days to read a novel by Eliot, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Lawrence, Mann, Kafka, Gide, Orwell, or Camus was to be reminded that ideas ruled both our emotions and our destinies.

Ideas mattered—not because they were interesting but because they had power. Hegel, at Jena, looked at Napoleon at the head of his troops and saw “an idea on horseback”; and just as Hegel mattered to Marx, so Kant had mattered to Coleridge. Indeed, ideas about man, society, and religion suffused the works of many 19th-century writers. Schopenhauer mattered to Tolstoy, and Tolstoy mattered to readers in a way that our best novelists can no longer hope to duplicate. If philosophy, in Goethe's words, underpinned eras of great cultural accomplishment (“*Epoche der forcierten Talente entsprang aus der Philosophischen*”), one has to wonder which philosophical ideas inspire the current crop of artists and writers. Or is that too much to ask? Unless I am very much mistaken, the last philosopher to exert wide-ranging influence was Wittgenstein. Although Wittgenstein certainly mattered to every person

interested in ideas around midcentury, in the end he was co-opted by portentous art critics of the 1970s and 80s who thought the *Tractatus* could prop up feeble paintings and shallow conceptual installations.

That Wittgenstein could have been so casually diluted by the art world was a sign that the intellectual weather had changed—perhaps for good. A new set of ideas had begun to assert itself, one that tended to lower the temperature of those grand philosophic and aesthetic credos that for decades had captivated writers and scholars. The new precepts and axioms began their peregrinations in the 20s and 30s when language philosophers were unmooring metaphysics from philosophy, and two French historians, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, were altering approaches to historical thinking. Instead of world-historical individuals bestriding events, as Hegel and Emerson had suggested, the Annales School stipulated that unique configurations of economic, social, and geographic factors determined the customs and behaviors—indeed, the fate—of regional people. Popes and princes may have fomented wars, revolutions, and religious schisms, but subtler, more far-reaching forces were also at work, which could be extrapolated from the quantifiable data found in everything from hospital records to ships' manifests.

This focus on the endemic components of society soon found its analogue in deconstruction, which elevated the social-semiotic conditions of language over the authors who modulated and teased it into literary art. Whatever the differences among the various poststructuralist schools of thought, the art of inversion, the transferring of significance from the exalted to the unappreciated, was a common feature. To read Barthes, Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva was to realize that everything that was formerly beneath our notice now required a phenomenologically informed second glance. And for theorists of a certain stripe on both sides of the Atlantic, this created a de-familiarized zone of symbols and referents whose meaning lay not below the surface of things, but out in the open. Say what you want about the French, they made us look at what was in front of our noses. Warhol's soup can didn't just fall out of the sky; it had begun to take shape in Paris in the 30s; Warhol simply brought the obvious to the attention of museumgoers.

Art and literature survived the onslaught of critical theory, but not without a major derailment. The banal, the ordinary, the popular became both the focus and the conduit of aesthetic expression. This may be something of an exaggeration, but it's hard not to

view the work of John Cage, Andy Warhol, and Alain Robbe-Grillet as compositions less interested in art than in the conceit that anything could be art. And while this attempt to validate the ordinary may have been in step with the intellectual tempo, it also summoned from the academy an exegesis so abstruse, so pumped up with ersatz hermeneutics that, in reality, it showcased the aesthetic void it so desperately attempted to disguise. And this absence was nothing less than the expulsion of those ideas that were formerly part of the humanistic charter to create meaning in verbal, plastic, and aural mediums.

Not that this bothered postmodern theorists whose unabashed mission was to expose Western civilization's hidden agenda: the doctrinal attitudes and assumptions about art, sex, and race embedded in our linguistic and social codes. For many critics in the 1970s and 80s, the Enlightenment had been responsible for generating ideas about the world that were simply innocent of their own implications. Accordingly, bold new ideas were required that recognized the ideological framework of ideas in general. So Barthes gave us "The Death of the Author," and Foucault concluded that man is nothing more than an Enlightenment invention, while Paul de Man argued that insofar as language is concerned there is "in a very radical sense no such thing as the human."

All of which made for lively, unruly times in the humanities. It also made for the end of ideas as Trilling conceived them. For implicit in the idea that culture embodies physiological and psychological codes is the idea that everything can be reduced to a logocentric perspective, in which case all schools of thought become in the end variant expressions of the mind's tendencies, and the principles they affirm become less significant than the fact that the mind is constituted to think and signify in particular ways. This may be the reason that there are no more schools of thought in the humanities as we once understood them. Obviously one can still learn about the tenets of the Frankfurt School and Prague School in courses across the country, just as one can study the works of Marxist and psychoanalytic critics (Althusser, Lacan, Deleuze, Lyotard, Marcuse, Norman O. Brown) and the deconstructionist writings of Derrida and de Man—but the *frisson* is gone, the intellectual energy dissipated as historical memory. Ironically, the last great surge of ideas in the humanities was essentially antihumanist. And because the academy eagerly embraced and paraded these ideas, the humanities themselves began to shrink. For when literature professors began to apply critical theory to the teaching of books they were, in effect, committing suicide by theory.

This is not to suggest that the humanities have been completely revamped by the postmodern ethos. There are professors of English who teach literature the old-fashioned way, calling attention to form, imagery, character, metaphor, genre, and the changing relationship between books and society. Some may slant their coursework toward the racial, sexual, and political context of stories and poems; others may differentiate between the purely formal and the more indefinably cultural. That said, what the postmodernists indirectly accomplished was to open the humanities to the sciences, particularly neuroscience. By exposing the ideological codes in language, by revealing the secret grammar of architectural narrative and poetic symmetries, and by identifying the biases that frame “disinterested” judgment, postmodern theorists provided a blueprint of how we necessarily think and express ourselves. In their own way, they mirrored the latest developments in neurology, psychology, and evolutionary biology. To put it in the most basic terms: Our preferences, behaviors, tropes, and thoughts—the very stuff of consciousness—are byproducts of the brain’s activity. And once we map the electrochemical impulses that shoot between our neurons, we should be able to understand—well, everything. So every discipline becomes implicitly a neurodiscipline, including ethics, aesthetics, musicology, theology, literature, whatever.

For instance, psychologists and legal scholars, spurred by brain research and sophisticated brain-scanning techniques, have begun to reconsider ideas about volition. If all behavior has an electrochemical component, then in what sense—psychological, legal, moral—is a person responsible for his actions? Joshua Greene and Jonathan Cohen in a famous 2004 paper contend that neuroscience has put a new spin on free will and culpability: It “can help us see that all behavior is mechanical, that all behavior is produced by chains of physical events that ultimately reach back to forces beyond the agent’s control.” Their hope is that the courts will ultimately discard blame-based punishment in favor of more “consequentialist approaches.”

All this emphasis on the biological basis of human behavior is not to everyone’s liking. The British philosopher Roger Scruton, for one, takes exception to the notion that neuroscience can explain us to ourselves. He rejects the thought that the structure of the brain also structures the person, since an important distinction exists between an event in the brain and the behavior that follows. And, by the same token, the firing of neurons does not in a strictly causal sense account for identity, since a “person” is not identical to his or her physiological components. Even more damning are the accusations in Sally Satel and Scott O. Lilienfeld’s *Brainwashed: The*

*Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience*, which argues that the insights gathered from neurotechnologies have less to them than meets the eye. The authors seem particularly put out by the real-world applications of neuroscience as doctors, psychologists, and lawyers increasingly rely on its tenuous and unprovable conclusions. Brain scans evidently are “often ambiguous representations of a highly complex system ... so seeing one area light up on an MRI in response to a stimulus doesn’t automatically indicate a particular sensation or capture the higher cognitive functions that come from those interactions.”

What makes these arguments, as well as those swirling around evolution, different from the ideas that agitated Trilling can be summed up in a single word: perspective. Where once the philosophical, political, and aesthetic nature of ideas was the sole source of their appeal, that appeal now seems to derive from something far more tangible and local. We have shifted our focus from the meaning of ideas to the means by which they’re produced. The same questions that always intrigued us—What is justice? What is the good life? What is morally valid? What is free will?—take a back seat to the biases embedded in our neural circuitry. Instead of grappling with the gods, we seem to be more interested in the topography of Mt. Olympus.



In other words, there’s a good reason that “neurohumanities” are making headway in the academy. Now that psychoanalytic, Marxist, and literary theory have fallen from grace, neuroscience and evolutionary biology can step up. And what better way for the liberal arts to save themselves than to borrow liberally from science? A 2013 article in *The Nation* informs us that “Duke and Vanderbilt universities now have neuroscience centers with specialties in humanities hybrids” and that Georgia Tech held a Neuro-Humanities

Entanglement Conference in 2012 because “emerging research in the brain sciences has set into motion fundamental questions relating to social, political, aesthetic, and scientific discoveries.” Apparently, speech, writing, meaning, and self-image are all “entangled with neural circuitry.” The message is clear: We can no longer ignore the fact that cognition is quite literally the tissue that connects all manner of humanistic endeavor.

“Can ‘Neuro Lit Crit’ Save the Humanities?” *The New York Times* asked in 2010. Apparently so, if the government and foundations are more inclined to support the humanities when they start borrowing terms and ideas from cognitive science. It seems that the more “scientific” the approach to the arts, the more seriously they are taken. In a 2008 paper titled “The Seductive Allure of Neuroscience Explanations,” Deena Skolnick Weisberg and colleagues demonstrated that ordinary people’s opinions were so influenced by neuroscientific terms that any explanation or critical judgment employing them seemed valid, however nonsensical. Well, professors of English and philosophy are ordinary people, too.

Although I haven’t done a precise count, the nonfiction books that receive the most play in our book reviews and general-interest magazines deal with neurological and evolutionary topics. Particle and quantum physics receive their due, but the ideas associated with them are so mathematically recondite that any general discussion is somewhat beside the point. There is also astrophysics, which continues to bring us the implausible news of the origin, expansion, and ending of the universe, not to mention the idea that ours is but one universe among an infinite number of parallel ones. None of this may affect the price of oil or Broadway box office, but the “conformal cyclic cosmology” of Roger Penrose, which attempts to explain the mystery of increasing entropy in a universe that had to begin in a state of maximum entropy, and Lee Smolin’s recasting of Einsteinian relativity, whereby the four-dimensional space-time continuum is less a fact than an idea, and less an idea than an illusion (because “the real relationships that form the world are a dynamical network” evolving over time), are damned interesting ideas.

As are those found in Thomas Nagel’s controversial book *Mind and Cosmos*, which had scientists up in arms because Nagel had the gall to question the neo-Darwinian belief that consciousness, like any aspect of adaptability, is evolutionary in nature. “It is prima facie highly implausible,” Nagel writes, “that life as we know it is the result of a sequence of physical accidents together with the mechanism of natural selection.” Though there is precious little

evidence, Nagel chooses to believe in a teleological universe with nature predisposed to give rise to conscious existence, since no mechanistic explanation seems commensurate with the miracle of subjective experience and the ability to reason.

Nagel isn't the only voice in the wilderness. There are scientists, not many to be sure, who also hypothesize that human life was inevitable. Robert Hazen, a mineralogist and biogeologist, put it this way: "Biochemistry is wired into the universe. The self-made cell emerges from geochemistry as inevitably as basalt or granite." Indeed, the tendency to think that organisms increase in complexity over time seems natural. So why not actual laws of nature to vouchsafe this eventuality? According to Stuart Kauffman of the Santa Fe Institute, the universe gives us "order for free." Kauffman believes that all molecules must sooner or later catalyze themselves in self-sustaining reactions, or "autocatalytic networks," crossing the boundary between inanimate and animate.

The more common view is that while natural selection encourages the development and retention of traits that help us to survive, evolution is essentially directionless; it has no goals, no set outcome. What's confusing for the interested layman is the divergence of educated opinion on the subject. On the one hand, you have philosophers and psychologists like Denis Dutton advocating for an evolutionary bias toward beauty, morality, and even God. And, on the other hand, there are evolutionary biologists like Stephen Jay Gould who insisted that our preferences and biases, instead of being adaptations, derived from our oversized brains, byproducts of a physiological anomaly. This anomaly, the human brain, is, of course, all the rage these days: the one big idea capable of subsuming all others.

Twenty-five years ago, humanist ideas still had relevance; it seemed important to discuss critical models and weigh ideas about how to read a text. "What are you rebelling against?" a young woman asked Brando in *The Wild One*. "What d'ya got?" he replied. As if to make up for two and a half centuries of purportedly objective aesthetic and moral judgments, an array of feminists, Marxists, deconstructionists, and semioticians from Yale to Berkeley routinely engaged in bitter skirmishes. Yes, a few traditional men and women of letters continued to defend objective values, but it seemed that practically everyone in the academy was engaged on some antinomian quest.

Nothing remotely similar exists today. Pundits and professors may still kick around ideas about our moral or spiritual confusion, but



the feeling of urgency that characterized the novels of Gide, Mann, Murdoch, Bellow, or Sebald seems awfully scarce. Is there a novelist today of whom we can say, as someone said of Dostoevsky, he “felt thought”? To read Dostoevsky, as Michael Dirda pointed out, is to encounter “souls chafed and lacerated by theories.” This is not to suggest that you can’t find ideas in Richard Powers or David Foster Wallace, it’s just that the significance attached to their ideas has been dramatically muted by more pressing concerns.

What these concerns are will be a matter of individual taste and temperament. Nonetheless, no one who came of age in the 60s or 70s can fail to notice that the gods who mesmerized Trilling have dropped from sight. And it’s precisely because Trilling and T.S. Eliot were the high priests of modernism and Derrida the iconic trickster of postmodernism that we’re forced to acknowledge that no literary or philosophical thinker has arisen to take their place. As for the ideas that absorb our chattering classes, they are hardly divine or intrusive. Discounting the ideological posturing of zealots and jihadists, of fundamentalists and anti-religionists, how many lives are affected by an adherence to, or rejection of, humanist ideals? Recent arguments about God or creationism are old hat, despite the sense of urgency expressed by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. Lord, how far removed these trumpeting denunciations are from the nuanced considerations of Paul Tillich, Hans Jonas, and Reinhold Niebuhr. That “dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet” is hardly dark or bloody.

In fact, the crossroads have a whole new look to them. In April 2013, Prospect magazine, hoping to provide “a snapshot of the intellectual trends that dominate our age,” conducted a poll to identify the most important world thinkers. Among the top 30 “winners” there was only one novelist, Arundhati Roy; one historian, Niall Ferguson; and not a single poet or literary critic. A sprinkling of philosophers (Martha Nussbaum, Michael Sandel, Roberto Unger) rounded out the complete list of 65 thinkers, which consisted mainly of economists, psychologists, biologists, sociologists, and political scientists. Aside from wondering what grand intellectual design informs the work of such winners as Nate Silver and George Soros, I attach no judgment to the choices. The more public the figure, apparently the more intellectual his or her accomplishments. But that’s the way of intellectual fashion; what bothered intellectuals two or three decades ago is now passé. Had a magazine in 1980 surveyed the “top thinkers” of that day, a goodly number of critics and historians would have made the grade. To name just a few: Paul de Man, Edward Said, Harold Bloom, Hilton Kramer, George

Steiner, Isaiah Berlin, Raymond Williams, Jacques Barzun, Eric Hobsbawm, Susan Sontag, Hannah Arendt, and Hugh Trevor-Roper.

The liberal arts, to put it gently, are not where the action is these days. Apparently, only 7.6 percent of bachelor's degrees were granted in the humanities in 2010 and, according to William Deresiewicz's recent book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, the proportion of students majoring in English declined to 3 percent in 2011-12, less than half of what it had been 40 years ago. None of this presupposes the absence of important ideas, but it does suggest that the really interesting ideas no longer flow from the humanities. Francis Fukuyama's protestations about the end of history in 1989 seemed more of a stunt, albeit an Hegelian stunt, than a credible vision of the future. On occasion, an anthropologist or a professor of geography like Jared Diamond has come along and put a different spin on how societies evolve—environmental and ecological factors still trump politics and belief-systems—but for the most part, the ideas that engage us and seem essential to understanding how we think and function are primarily scientific in nature.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the intellectual world has not been so much one world as a hazy, obscure planet around which various well-marked satellites circle, each believing its rotation comes closest to illuminating the hidden undifferentiated surface. These smaller, self-contained entities, whether they were of the scientific, scholarly, or belletrist kind, were for the most part intolerant of one another, their orbits tracing dissimilar points of view. The bifurcation of knowledge that emerged during the Enlightenment, when philosophers argued that universal truths could be gleaned through study and reason, continued apace until scientist, classicist, theologian, economist, and alienist could no longer converse profitably about their respective fields. But except for the most introverted, tunnel-vision thinkers, intellectuals still met and collided on ideological grounds. The meaning of life, the ethical way to live, the moral makeup of society, the rights of the individual, the good of the community, the role of art, were issues that engrossed all thoughtful people.


While there is no shortage of conflict around the globe today—wars, rebellions, incursions, protests—the disputes that galvanized intellectuals of 20 and 30 years ago seem far removed from daily life. The new disputations, aside from internecine disagreements that are always cropping up in particular fields, center on aspects of evolutionary biology and cognitive science. The ideas engen-

dered during the Enlightenment regarding epistemology, government, and aesthetics no longer engage our best minds except as the problematic yield of an inherited psychological and physiological compound. We continue to discuss the state of education, the meaning of history, the efficacy of language, and the interpretation of books, but opposing ideological and political views seem pat and tired. A certain sameness afflicts our intellectual journals except when we speak about the brain or the meaning of consciousness. And when one thinks about what's past and what's present, it's hard to imagine someone tomorrow who could possess the transformative power of Descartes, Newton, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and, on a lesser scale, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, Braudel, Thomas Kuhn, or Derrida.

Postmodernism—which was smart, stimulating, ridiculous, and objectionable by turn—has left us in the lurch. Having discredited the centrality of the humanistic enterprise, the postmodern ethos of inversion has forced us to acknowledge that culture and all that culture once meant is not a thing apart but simply the semiotic expression of society's need to sustain those in power. So hierarchies had to be dismantled; and onto the leveled playing field came poets who couldn't tell a lamb from an apple, painters who couldn't draw an apple, and conceptual “artists” like Damien Hirst who openly and cynically promote and sell non-art. Sheer frippery for the gullible.

The not-so-wonderful irony of the postmodern program was that its theoretic rigor and forceful determination to get to the bottom of things precipitated a great falling off in cultural life. Although we can't quite return to the “innocence” of modernism (never mind its many supple and complicated byways), we've also lost our appetite for locating hidden modalities in art and literature. Yet art and literature still have a place in our lives. How to explain it without resorting to the assumptive modes of criticism that the postmodernists did their best to undermine? This perceived stasis of nowhere-to-go is leading humanists back to old-fashioned methods of relying on the hard data and empirical certainty of scientific research.

If questions of art, beauty, morality, and value continue to engage us, the answers, so it's said, must lie in our genes. Or in our frontal cortices. Or in our innate capacity for wonder, which makes us adapt better to the wonder of existence. It's anyone's guess. It seems only that by ceding such questions to biological and cognitive science we have made peace, at least for the moment, with the ideas that used to make intellectuals reach for their pens and some-

times their guns. It's hard to know exactly what this concession means, yet one can't help but reflect that by placing too much faith in the human brain, we may be relinquishing the idea that the mind might one day fathom the human condition. 

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