

Grand sweeping theories of history aren't so popular these days. Neither are Objectivists. So it's not surprising that a grand theory of history based on the tenets of Objectivism has been virtually ignored.

The DIM Hypothesis claims to offer such a theory, and is the product of over ten year's work by Leonard Peikoff, founder of the Ayn Rand Institute.

The book touches on a topic of common interest to conservatives: what caused the modern-day degeneration of Western thought and culture? Was the cause merely, as Spengler suggested, the entropic decay inevitable to all complex societies? Or was it the product of determined action by a particular group of people? Did it all begin with the progressive intellectuals? Or the Puritans? Or Luther?

Objectivists have an unusual answer: Kant.

More specifically, a mode of thought which originated with Kant, and which came to dominate every field of knowledge in the centuries following the Enlightenment.

Peikoff's book describes three fundamental modes of thought: the Disintegrative mode, established by Kant; the Integrative mode, established by Aristotle; and the Misintegrative mode, established by Plato.

Peikoff differentiates the three modes by their stance towards "integration", a cognitive process which, in the Objectivist theory of knowledge, is essential to rational thought: integration essentially involves logically combining pieces of knowledge into systematic wholes. ("Synthesis" is a near-synonym). At the most basic level of thinking, humans integrate perceptual observations into abstract concepts; at higher levels, they integrate concepts into propositions, propositions into theories, and, sometimes, theories into universal systems of knowledge.

Thinkers can choose to integrate or not, and they can integrate validly or invalidly. Disintegrators eschew integration wherever

possible; integrators perform valid integrations; misintegrators integrate, but invalidly. (Peikoff judges validity based on his Objectivist framework, which, as I'll discuss below, some might object to).

If integration is so great, why isn't everyone a dedicated integrator? Because, Peikoff suggests, people hold differing beliefs on the efficacy of human reason. These beliefs fall into three broad stances:

Stance #1: human consciousness is necessarily divorced from ultimate reality, and the world we observe is merely a construct of our perception; logic is the manipulation of meaningless symbols; therefore neither observation nor logic can give us true knowledge.

Stance #2: the world we observe is merely a shadowy reflection of true reality, which is an abstract realm lying beyond space and time; observation of reality is therefore misleading or worthless; deductive logic built on *a priori* axioms (often axioms based on mystical insight or revealed truth) is the proper means of gaining knowledge.

Stance #3: the world is a knowable realm of concrete entities, perceivable by human senses; inductive logic is the tool which enables us to organise our perceptual observations; logic combined with observation is a reliable path to knowledge.

The first represents Kantian disintegration; the second Platonic misintegration; and the third Aristotelian integration. Not everyone holds these beliefs consciously. Indeed, most people don't. However, Peikoff holds, the deepest thinkers — the ones who have the greatest influence on cultural developments — do tend to follow one of these stances explicitly.

Peikoff labels Aristotle, Newton, and (unsurprisingly) Ayn Rand as archetypical integrators; Plato, Hegel and Einstein as archetypical misintegrators; and Kant, Rawls and Niels Bohr as archetypical disintegrators.

The systems defined by Plato, Kant and Aristotle are internally consistent, and so act as stable attractors in intellectual history. However, Peikoff also defines two "mixed modes", *Worldly*

Supernaturalism and Knowing Skepticism: misintegrators who maintain some commitment to reality, and disintegrators who maintain some commitment to reason. “Knowing Skepticism” is, in fact, the dominant intellectual tendency in our culture, and reveals itself in the obsession for statistical methods and p-value hunting in science, or for unprincipled pragmatism in politics.

I'll use Peikoff's labels to designate the five modes from here on:

I: integration (Aristotle)

M1: partial misintegration ("Worldly Supernaturalism")

M2: pure misintegration (Plato)

D1: partial disintegration ("Knowing Skepticism")

D2: pure disintegration (Kant)

The broad sweep of Western history within Peikoff's framework is then as follows. The Greeks represented the world's first I culture, and saw the establishment of I and M2 philosophy by Aristotle and Plato in Athens. The rise of the pragmatic but pious Romans represented a swing from I towards M1; Peikoff paints interesting portraits of the freedom-loving Greeks and the duty-bound Romans, and of the contrasts in their respective cultures.

The dark and middle ages were dominated by pure Platonism in the form of Christianity (M2), and were followed by a swing towards M1 with the rediscovery of Aristotle by the medieval scholastics. The Enlightenment — in particular, Newton's revolutionary “system of the world” — led to another brief flourishing of I, but Kant's “Copernican revolution of thought” represented the establishment of D, which would slowly come to dominate Western culture. Fascism and Marxism are both typed as M2; modern liberal culture is largely dominated by D1, but is gradually moving towards D2.

The bulk of the book is devoted to applying the framework to four broad fields, chosen to best illustrate the role of conceptual thought in history: literature (the most conceptual of arts), physics (the most conceptual of sciences), politics, and education. Conservatives will likely agree with much of Peikoff's analysis, and possibly also encounter some fresh insights. For example, though Peikoff describes in detail progressive ideology in education (D2), and its rejection of traditional pedagogy in favour of self-expression and socialisation, he also notes that modern

education is more “pluralist” (D1) than progressive; not committed to a single ideology but to a range of contradictory goals, and not teaching leftist dogma but simply a confusing mishmash of subjects.

He also distinguishes traditional socialism from postmodern egalitarianism, saying that the latter is not merely the evolution of the former, but is something fundamentally different. Socialists tended to view society as an entity with an existence transcending that of individual people, and had a concrete plan for achieving their utopian future; egalitarians, lacking a coherent worldview or plan, aim only to remove “inequality” or “oppression” or “hatred” from the world — and see these things as intrinsically bad, regardless of context. Socialists therefore are typed as M2; modern-day egalitarians (whether environmentalists, feminists, OWS or others) are typed as D2.

The section on physics is possibly the most questionable, as Peikoff is not a physicist, and he appears to be relying heavily on second-hand summarisations. Peikoff cites Newton as an exemplar of I for his establishment of the modern scientific method; Einstein is labelled as M1 for his tendency to reify abstractions; quantum physicists are labelled as D2 for their rejection of Aristotelian logic; and string theorists are labelled as M2 for their rationalistic theory of everything. The obvious problem here is that the latter three, even if wrong, did expose errors with Newtonian mechanics; that said, it is possible that modern physics has fallen down various philosophically-invalid rabbit holes, which would explain its split into mutually incompatible schools of thought.

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The obvious danger with any grand theory of history is that the complexity of mankind's story is shunted into an over-simplified conceptual scheme, where contradictory evidence is ignored to maintain a neat and tidy framework: in other words, misintegration. Peikoff naturally takes care to avoid this trap. The early chapters of the book, which aim to show that integration is *the* fundamental intellectual issue, are themselves a good example of integrated thought in practice — and, at the same time, demonstrate that Objectivists are not the intellectual lightweights they are often painted as.

I think Peikoff makes a solid case for the existence of the three modes, and for these three representing the fundamental categories of thinking styles. Certainly, one of the defining characteristics of modern thought is the eschewal of system-building and the rejection of any coherent philosophy as “dogma” and “ideology”, and I think Peikoff is correct in diagnosing this tendency as disintegration, and in linking it to the commonly-held belief that human knowledge must always be uncertain and limited.

His distinction between integration and misintegration is more slippery, since it rests on a notion of “validity” defined within the framework of Objectivism. Theists may well object to the requirement for valid integrators to be either atheists or deists; they (and others who share Peikoff's rejection of modern nihilism, but not his Objectivism) might be tempted to simplify the analysis by grouping together M and I. In this viewpoint, history would become a two-sided battle between integration and disintegration, between light and darkness, between divine knowledge and wilful ignorance. (Peikoff notes that this is precisely how M-thinkers have tended to view history). I think that there is, however, a fundamental difference between the Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of rationality, and that both are fundamentally distinct from modern skeptical nihilism; on this basis, I think the D/I/M trichotomy is justified.

I would have preferred to see more justification, though, for the notion that “philosophy is the prime mover of history”: the assumption that political, economic and social trends are all caused by intellectual movements, which ultimately stem from one of the three fountainheads (Plato, Kant or Aristotle). Certainly, many seemingly disparate movements often have shared philosophical roots. However, other factors also influence the spread of ideas. The Renaissance didn't happen merely because Thomas Aquinas made Aristotle hip again (as Peikoff and Rand sometimes suggest), but also because of the printing press and because of Europe's economic and technological development. Additionally, trying to link all intellectual developments to the three fountainheads seems to be based on an excessive belief in the primacy of individual genius.

Peikoff ends the book with a very unusual prediction: religious totalitarianism in the United States within fifty years.

His reasoning is that the current D-dominated culture is likely to fizzle out from its own internal inconsistency, and, without a strong representative of I waiting in the wings, a resurgence of M2 is the overwhelmingly likely outcome. Based on current trends, this will most likely be in the form of evangelical protestantism. Peikoff draws an analogy to Weimar Germany, where the pragmatic mainstream parties of both left and right (D1) could offer no firm resistance to the fanatically consistent ideology of the Nazis (M2).

Peikoff's modal breakdown of the US population is interesting:

D1: 15 million people; mostly college graduates,

D2: "high 6 or low 7 figures"; hardcore activists, generally allied with D1.

M1: a small niche, including some "old-school Catholic theologians" (most mainstream, liberal churches are modeless).

M2: between 60 and 120 million people; baptist, evangelical or similar Protestant churches.

I: 100,000 at most; Objectivists being the only significant representatives of this mode.

Interestingly, most people in the conservative blogosphere, from Catholic traditionalists to Misesian atheists, would arguably fit into M1.

As for Europe, with no strong native religious movement or other ideological group posing a serious threat to the reigning orthodoxy, Peikoff sees the culture continuing to be dominated by D1 and D2 for the foreseeable future — unless, of course, a large and fanatical religious group moves in from outside.