

Idea

In philosophy, **ideas** are usually taken as mental representational images of some object. Ideas can also be abstract concepts that do not present as mental images.^[1] Many philosophers have considered ideas to be a fundamental ontological category of being. The capacity to create and understand the meaning of ideas is considered to be an essential and defining feature of human beings. In a popular sense, an idea arises in a reflexive, spontaneous manner, even without thinking or serious reflection, for example, when we talk about the *idea* of a person or a place. A new or an original idea can often lead to innovation.



Plato, one of the first philosophers to discuss ideas in detail. Aristotle claims that many of Plato's views were Pythagorean in origin.

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Etymology

The word *idea* comes from Greek ἰδέα *idea* "form, pattern," from the root of ἰδεῖν *idein*, "to see." ^[2]

Innate and adventitious ideas

One view on the nature of ideas is that there exist some ideas (called *innate ideas*) which can be general and abstract that they could not have arisen as a representation of an object of our perception but rather were in some sense always present. These are distinguished from *adventitious ideas* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-ideas/>) which are images or concepts which are accompanied by the judgment that they are caused or occasioned by an external object.^[1]

Another view holds that we only discover ideas in the same way that we discover the real world, from personal experiences. The view that humans acquire all or almost all their behavioral traits from nurture (life experiences) is known as *tabula rasa* ("blank slate"). Most of the confusions in the way ideas arise is at least in part due to the use of the term "idea" to cover both the representation percepts and the object of conceptual thought. This can be always illustrated in terms of the scientific doctrines of innate ideas, "concrete ideas versus abstract ideas", as well as "simple ideas versus complex ideas".^[3]

Philosophy

Plato

Plato in Ancient Greece was one of the earliest philosophers to provide a detailed discussion of ideas and of the thinking process (in Plato's Greek the word *idea* carries a rather different sense from our modern English term). Plato argued in dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus* that there is a realm of ideas or forms (*eidei*), which exist independently of anyone who may have thoughts on these ideas, and it is the ideas which distinguish mere opinion from knowledge, for unlike material things which are transient and liable to contrary properties, ideas are unchanging and nothing but just what they are. Consequently, Plato seems to assert forcefully that material things can only be the objects of opinion; real knowledge can only be had of unchanging ideas. Furthermore, ideas for Plato appear to serve as universals; consider the following passage from the *Republic*:

"We both assert that there are," I said, "and distinguish in speech, many fair things, many good things, and so on for each kind of thing."

"Yes, so we do."

"And we also assert that there is a fair itself, a good itself, and so on for all things that we set down as many. Now, again, we refer to them as one *idea* of each as though the *idea* were one; and we address it as that which really *is*."

"That's so."

"And, moreover, we say that the former are seen, but not intellected, while the *ideas* are intellected but not seen."

— Plato, Bk. VI 507b-c

René Descartes

Descartes often wrote of the meaning of *idea* as an image or representation, often but not necessarily "in the mind", which was well known in the vernacular. Despite that Descartes is usually credited with the invention of the non-Platonic use of the term, he at first followed this vernacular use.^b In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* he says, "Some of my thoughts are like images of things, and it is to these alone that the name 'idea' properly belongs." He sometimes maintained that ideas were innate^[4] and uses of the term *idea* diverge from the original primary scholastic use. He provides multiple non-equivalent definitions of the term, uses it to refer to as many as six distinct kinds of entities, and divides *ideas* inconsistently into various genetic categories.^[5] For him knowledge took the form of ideas and philosophical investigation is the deep consideration of these entities.

John Locke

In striking contrast to Plato's use of idea^[6] is that of John Locke. In his Introduction to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke defines *idea* as "that term which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking; and I could not avoid frequently using it." ^[7] He said he regarded the book necessary to examine our own abilities and see what objects our understandings were, or were not, fitted to deal with. In his philosophy other outstanding figures followed in his footsteps — Hume and Kant in the 18th century, Arthur Schopenhauer in the 19th century, and Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Karl Popper in the 20th century. Locke always believed in *good sense* — not pushing things to extremes and on taking fully into account the plain facts of the matter. He considered his common-sense ideas "good-tempered, moderate, and down-to-earth."

As John Locke studied humans in his work "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" he continually referenced Descartes for ideas as he asked this fundamental question: "When we are concerned with something about which we have no certain knowledge, what rules or standards should guide how confident we allow ourselves to be that our opinions are right?" ^[8] A simpler way of putting it is how do humans know ideas, and what are the different types of ideas. An idea to Locke "can simply mean some sort of brute experience." ^[9] He shows that there are "No innate principles in the mind."^[10] Thus, he concludes that "our ideas are all experiential in nature." ^[11] An experience can either be a sensation or a reflection: "consider whether there are any innate ideas in the mind before any are brought in by the impression from sensation or reflection." ^[8] Therefore, an idea was an experience in which the human mind apprehended something.

In a Lockean view, there are really two types of ideas: complex and simple. Simple ideas are the building blocks for much more complex ideas, and "While the mind is wholly passive in the reception of simple ideas, it is very active in the building of complex ideas..." ^[12] Complex ideas, therefore, can either be modes, substances, or relations. Modes are when ideas are combined in order to convey new information. For instance, David Banach ^[13] gives the example of beauty as a mode. He says that it is the combination of color and form. Substances, however, are different. Substances are certain objects, that can either be dogs, cats, or tables. And relations represent the relationship between two or more ideas. In this way, Locke did, in fact, answer his own questions about ideas and humans.

David Hume

Hume differs from Locke by limiting *idea* to the more or less vague mental reconstructions of perceptions, the perceptual process being described as an "impression." ^{[14][15]} Hume shared with Locke the basic empiricist premise that it is only from life experiences (whether their own or others') that humans' knowledge of the existence of anything outside of themselves can be ultimately derived, that they shall carry on doing what they

are prompted to do by their emotional drives of varying kinds. In choosing the means to those ends, they shall follow their accustomed associations of ideas.^d Hume has contended and defended the notion that "reason alone is merely the 'slave of the passions'." [16][17]

Immanuel Kant



"Modern Book
Printing" from the
Walk of Ideas

Immanuel Kant defines an *idea* as opposed to a concept. "Regulative ideas" are ideals that one must tend towards, but by definition may not be completely realized. Liberty, according to Kant, is an idea. The autonomy of the rational and universal subject is opposed to the determinism of the empirical subject.^[18] Kant felt that it is precisely in knowing its limits that philosophy exists. The business of philosophy he thought was not to give rules, but to analyze the private judgement of good common sense.^e

Rudolf Steiner

Whereas Kant declares limits to knowledge ("we can never know the thing in itself"), in his epistemological work, Rudolf Steiner sees *ideas* as "objects of experience" which the mind apprehends, much as the eye apprehends light. In

Goethean Science (1883), he declares, "Thinking ... is no more and no less an organ of perception than the eye or ear. Just as the eye perceives colors and the ear sounds, so thinking perceives ideas." He holds this to be the premise upon which Goethe made his natural-scientific observations.

Wilhelm Wundt

Wundt widens the term from Kant's usage to include *conscious representation of some object or process of the external world*. In so doing, he includes not only ideas of memory and imagination, but also perceptual processes, whereas other psychologists confine the term to the first two groups.^[14] One of Wundt's main concerns was to investigate conscious processes in their own context by experiment and introspection. He regarded both of these as *exact methods*, interrelated in that experimentation created optimal conditions for introspection. Where the experimental method failed, he turned to other *objectively valuable aids*, specifically to *those products of cultural communal life which lead one to infer particular mental motives*. *Outstanding among these are speech, myth, and social custom*. Wundt designed the basic mental activity apperception — a unifying function which should be understood as an activity of the will. Many aspects of his empirical physiological psychology are used today. One is his principles of mutually enhanced contrasts and of assimilation and dissimilation (i.e. in color and form perception and his advocacy of *objective* methods of expression and of recording results, especially in language. Another is the principle of heterogony of ends — that multiply motivated acts lead to unintended side effects which in turn become motives for new actions.^[19]

Charles Sanders Peirce

C. S. Peirce published the first full statement of pragmatism in his important works "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878) and "The Fixation of Belief" (1877).^[20] In "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" he proposed that a *clear idea* (in his study he uses concept and *idea* as synonymic) is defined as one, when it is apprehended such as it will be recognized wherever it is met, and no other will be mistaken for it. If it fails of this clearness, it is said to be obscure. He argued that to understand an idea clearly we should ask ourselves what difference its application would make to our evaluation of a proposed solution to the problem at hand. Pragmatism (a term he appropriated for use in this context), he defended, was a method for ascertaining the meaning of terms (as a theory of meaning). The originality of his ideas is in their rejection of what was accepted as a view and

understanding of knowledge by scientists for some 250 years, i.e. that, he pointed, knowledge was an impersonal fact. Peirce contended that we acquire knowledge as *participants*, not as *spectators*. He felt "the real", sooner or later, is information acquired through ideas and knowledge with the application of logical reasoning would finally result in. He also published many papers on logic in relation to *ideas*.

G. F. Stout and J. M. Baldwin

G. F. Stout and J. M. Baldwin, in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, define *idea* as "the reproduction with a more or less adequate image, of an object not actually present to the senses." ^[21] They point out that an idea and a perception are by various authorities contrasted in various ways. "Difference in degree of intensity", "comparative absence of bodily movement on the part of the subject", "comparative dependence on mental activity", are suggested by psychologists as characteristic of an idea as compared with a perception.^[14]

It should be observed that an idea, in the narrower and generally accepted sense of a mental reproduction, is frequently composite. That is, as in the example given above of the idea of a chair, a great many objects, differing materially in detail, all call a single idea. When a man, for example, has obtained an idea of chairs in general by comparison with which he can say "This is a chair, that is a stool", he has what is known as an "abstract idea" distinct from the reproduction in his mind of any particular chair (see abstraction). Furthermore, a complex idea may not have any corresponding physical object, though its particular constituent elements may severally be the reproductions of actual perceptions. Thus the idea of a centaur is a complex mental picture composed of the ideas of man and horse, that of a mermaid of a woman and a fish.^[14]

In anthropology and the social sciences

Diffusion studies explore the spread of ideas from culture to culture. Some anthropological theories hold that all cultures imitate ideas from one or a few original cultures, the Adam of the Bible, or several cultural circles that overlap. Evolutionary diffusion theory holds that cultures are influenced by one another but that similar ideas can be developed in isolation.

In the mid-20th century, social scientists began to study how and why ideas spread from one person or culture to another. Everett Rogers pioneered diffusion of innovations studies, using research to prove factors in adoption and profiles of adopters of ideas. In 1976, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins suggested applying biological evolutionary theories to the spread of ideas. He coined the term meme to describe an abstract unit of selection, equivalent to the gene in evolutionary biology.

Semantics

Samuel Johnson

James Boswell recorded Samuel Johnson's opinion about ideas. Johnson claimed that they are mental images or internal visual pictures. As such, they have no relation to words or the concepts which are designated by verbal names.

He was particularly indignant against the almost universal use of the word *idea* in the sense of *notion* or *opinion*, when it is clear that *idea* can only signify something of which an image can be formed in the mind. We may have an *idea* or *image* of a mountain, a tree, a building; but we cannot surely have an *idea* or *image* of an *argument* or *proposition*. Yet we hear the sages of the law 'delivering their *ideas* upon the question under consideration;' and the first speakers in

parliament 'entirely coinciding in the *idea* which has been ably stated by an honourable member;' — or 'reprobating an *idea* unconstitutional, and fraught with the most dangerous consequences to a great and free country.' Johnson called this 'modern cant.'

— Boswell's Life of Johnson, Tuesday, 23 September 1777^[22]

Relationship of ideas to modern legal time- and scope-limited monopolies

Relationship between ideas and patents

On susceptibility to exclusive property

It has been pretended by some, (and in England especially,) that inventors have a natural and exclusive right to their inventions, and not merely for their own lives, but inheritable to their heirs. But while it is a moot question whether the origin of any kind of property is derived from nature at all, it would be singular to admit a natural and even an hereditary right to inventors. It is agreed by those who have seriously considered the subject, that no individual has, of natural right, a separate property in an acre of land, for instance.

By a universal law, indeed, whatever, whether fixed or movable, belongs to all men equally and in common, is the property for the moment of him who occupies it, but when he relinquishes the occupation, the property goes with it. Stable ownership is the gift of social law, and is given late in the progress of society. It would be curious then, if an idea, the fugitive fermentation of an individual brain, could, of natural right, be claimed in exclusive and stable property.

If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of every one, and the receiver cannot dispossess himself of it. Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.

That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density in any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation. Inventions then cannot, in nature, be a subject of property.

Society may give an exclusive right to the profits arising from them, as an encouragement to men to pursue ideas which may produce utility, but this may or may not be done, according to the will and convenience of the society, without claim or complaint from anybody. Accordingly, it is a fact, as far as I am informed, that England was, until we copied her, the only country on earth which ever, by a general law, gave a legal right to the exclusive use of an idea. In some other countries it is sometimes done, in a great case, and by a special and personal act but, generally speaking, other nations have thought that these monopolies produce more embarrassment than advantage to society.^[23]

Patent law regulates various aspects related to the functional manifestation of inventions based on new ideas or incremental improvements to existing ones. Thus, patents have a direct relationship to ideas.

Relationship between ideas and copyrights

In some cases, authors can be granted limited legal monopolies on the manner in which certain works are expressed. This is known colloquially as copyright, although the term intellectual property is used mistakenly in place of *copyright*. Copyright law regulating the aforementioned monopolies generally does not cover the actual ideas. The law does not bestow the legal status of property upon ideas per se. Instead, laws purport to regulate events related to the usage, copying, production, sale and other forms of exploitation of the fundamental expression of a work, that may or may not carry ideas. Copyright law is fundamentally different from patent law in this respect: patents do grant monopolies on ideas (more on this below).

A copyright is meant to regulate some aspects of the usage of expressions of a work, *not* an idea. Thus, copyrights have a negative relationship to ideas.

Work means a tangible medium of expression. It may be an original or derivative work of art, be it literary, dramatic, musical recitation, artistic, related to sound recording, etc. In (at least) countries adhering to the Berne Convention, copyright automatically starts covering the work upon the original creation and fixation thereof, without any extra steps. While creation usually involves an idea, the idea in itself does not suffice for the purposes of claiming copyright.^{[24][25][26][27] [28]}



A picture of a lightbulb is often used to represent a person having a *bright idea*.

Relationship of ideas to confidentiality agreements

Confidentiality and nondisclosure agreements are legal instruments that assist corporations and individuals in keeping ideas from escaping to the general public. Generally, these instruments are covered by contract law.

See also

- Idealism
- Brainstorming
- Creativity techniques
- Diffusion of innovations
- Form
- Ideology
- List of perception-related topics
- Notion (philosophy)
- Object of the mind
- Think tank
- Thought experiment
- History of ideas
- Intellectual history
- Concept

- Philosophical analysis

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25. *Copyright protection extends to a description, explanation, or illustration of an idea or system, assuming that the requirements of copyright law are met. Copyright in such a case protects the particular literary or pictorial expression chosen by the author. But it gives the copyright owner no exclusive rights concerning the idea, method or system involved.* CIT : US Copyright Office (<https://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ31.pdf>), circular 31 reviewed: 01/2012 P
26. *In the case of copyright law, it is the work that realizes the idea that is protected (i.e. a document), and it is the act of recording that work that fixes copyright in the item itself.* – CIT : The UK Copyright Service (https://www.copyrightservice.co.uk/protect/p21_protecting_ideas), Issued: 17th May 2007, Last amended: 17th May 2007
27. (...) *there is likely to be an infringement of copyright if the way the information is expressed in the copyrighted work used without the permission of the copyright owner and no exception to infringement applies to the use. This can sometimes occur even if the precise expression is not directly reproduced, but important elements of the work, such as the structure and arrangement of the information, are copied.* – CIT : Australien Copyright Council (https://www.copyright.org.au/acc_prod/ACC/Legal_Advice/Manage/Precedents/019_Protecting_Ideas.aspx?WebsiteKey=8a471e74-3f78-4994-9023-316f0ecef4ef), ACN 001 228 780, 2017
28. *Intellectual property consists of products, work or processes that you have created and which give you a competitive advantage. There are 3 subcategories : **Industrial property** : inventions (patents), trademarks, industrial designs, new varieties of plants and geographic indications of origin **Artistic work** protected by copyright: original literary and artistic works, music, television broadcasting, software, databases, architectural designs, advertising creations and multimedia **Commercial strategies** : trade secrets, know-how, confidentiality agreements, or rapid production.* – CIT : Intellectual property rights (https://europa.eu/youreurope/business/start-grow/intellectual-property-rights/index_en.htm), European Union (<https://europa.eu/>), Updated 22/01/2018

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^c Locke, pages 59 - 61, 102 - 109, 122 - 124, 142, 185

^d Hume, pages 61, 103, 112 - 117, 142 - 143, 155, 185

^e Kant, pages 9, 38, 57, 87, 103, 119, 131 - 137, 149, 182

^f Peirce, pages 61, *How to Make Our Ideas Clear* 186 - 187 and 189

^g Saint Augustine, pages 30, 144; *City of God* 51, 52, 53 and *The Confessions* 50, 51, 52

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An Encyclopedia of World Literature

^{1a}page 774 Plato (c. 427–348 BC)

^{2a}page 779 Francesco Petrarca

^{3a}page 770 Charles Sanders Peirce

^{1b}page 849 the Renaissance

- This article incorporates text from the Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, a publication now in the public domain.

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Further reading

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