

## **The Ideas Game**

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Edited extract from Chapter 9: “The Ideas Game” of my 2014 book *On Beautiful Days Such as This: A philosopher’s search for love, work, place, meaning, and suchlike* (available from Amazon [here](#)).

If those who advance original ideas can rarely know with any degree of certainty what the ultimate practical impact of these ideas will be, so they can rarely tell with any degree of certainty what kinds of reception their ideas will receive. And the more original, different, or ‘far out’ these ideas are, the more this applies. Even if you happen to be essentially right about something of genuine significance, there is absolutely no guarantee that the world will recognize that any time soon. Indeed, there is no guarantee that you will even be understood in the first place.

Consider the following delightful illustration of this last point, which comes from Chaim Weizmann, a contemporary of Einstein’s and a notable chemist in his own right – thus, no slouch himself when it came to understanding complex scientific ideas. (Weizmann was also notable for his work in Jewish politics, which culminated in him serving as the first President of Israel for the last three years of his life, from 1949-1952 – but that is another story.) The story I want to relate here concerns a transatlantic boat trip that Weizmann

shared with Einstein to the US in 1921. Weizmann tells us in his memoirs that he and Einstein would get together on the boat every day and that every day Einstein would explain his ideas on relativity, which, at that time, very few people understood well. What, then, did Weizmann make of this masterclass in Einstein's revolutionary ideas? Just this: 'During our crossing, Einstein explained his theory to me every day, and by the time we arrived I was fully convinced he understood it.' Touché!

A reasonable understanding, let alone a deep understanding, of Einstein's ideas still eludes most of us a century after they were advanced. The best that most of us can do in the face of Einstein's genius is simply to pay lip service to the profundity of his ideas. We put  $E = mc^2$  on a T-shirt, buy a postcard with a picture of Einstein sticking his tongue out, or employ a helpful maxim such as this one (which derives from the physicist J. A. Wheeler): 'Matter tells space how to curve; space tells matter how to move.' (That is, despite how things appear, orbiting bodies, for example, actually move in straight lines; it's just that they do so in space – or, more correctly, space-time – that has been curved by larger masses. Now, anyone could have seen *that*, right?) Or, like Weizmann (or like me, below), we can make (hopefully) witty, knowing nods in Einstein's direction from our own positions of relative ignorance. Thus, for example, this short song-with-punch-line that I wrote many years ago:

### **When Albert Einstein met Charlie Chaplin**

When Albert Einstein met Charlie Chaplin,  
Charlie said, 'Tell me, Al, what is hapn'n?'  
Albert told him, 'God doesn't play  
dice with us,' and sent him on his way,  
but Charlie didn't see  
that Al was speaking ... *relatively*.

Then again, even if people claim to understand you, what they actually claim to be understanding might be entirely different from what you thought you were saying. I once heard Tom Stoppard make good on this point in his typically zany-but-brilliant way. He was asked by the moderator of a lunchtime arts festival held in Australia many years ago how he felt about academics and bright young PhDs 'finding things in the plays that you never put there'. Without batting an eyelid, Stoppard effortlessly replied with an analogy that placed *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, his marvellous, absurdist take on *Hamlet*, at the disposal of a customs inspector:

It's like coming back through customs when you've been abroad and you put the stuff on the table and the customs officer says, 'Anything to declare?' And you say, 'No, it's, er, you know, straightforward stuff: a couple of courtiers from Hamlet messing about Elsinore, wondering what's

going on, end up dead – that’s about it really.’ Then he starts ransacking the luggage and he comes up with all manner of exotic contraband and lays it all out: objective correlatives to the left, symbols to the right, and all manner of annotations in between. And he says, ‘Well, what have you got to say about *that?*’ And all you can say, really, is that you have to admit they’re there, but you don’t remember packing them!

Stoppard’s bull’s-eye analogy stayed with me, and its shrewd wisdom came in handy when I later began responding to critics of my own. The first thing you need to do is to work out what you did pack – and to clarify that, and the reasons why you packed it, if necessary – and what you didn’t pack. For despite Stoppard’s delightfully Dadaesque willingness to own up to whatever those who ransacked his luggage claimed to find, it is actually the case that many of your critics will either misinterpret what you *are* carrying or else try to plant stuff on you that you most definitely were *not* carrying and, quite possibly, would never want to carry. But at one level, it’s all good, for in tightening up your views in response to reasonable commentary and constructive criticisms as well as in defending your views against misguided or unreasonable interpretations, you find yourself developing more and more a well-considered view of your own.

But the ideas game can be brutal too, for beyond the realm of reasonable commentary, constructive criticism, and common-or-garden-variety versions of misguided or unreasonable interpretations lies a darker realm altogether. Here

we find those self-styled intellectual bruisers who would kill your ideas at birth – or as soon thereafter as possible – with the hatchets they sleep with by their sides. There is no depth of misrepresentation and *ad hominem* attack that some of these people will not sink to in order to bury their hatchets as deep inside your work as they can; for them, all bets are off; Queensbury rules don't apply.

I may be a non-believer in general, but I do secretly hope against hope that there is a special corner in hell reserved for these people: one in which they take it in turns for eternity to verbally rip each other to pieces. After the first few eons have dragged by, even they might come to realize just how stupid, pointless, and boring an exercise this is.

Yet, on beautiful days such as this, it's possible to see a positive side even to these denizens of the darker reaches of the ideas game. For when you have received what you imagine to be The Nastiest/Most Uncharitable Review in the History of the Universe and yet still wake up the next day to find that everything is *pretty much as it was* and that *the world is carrying on* in spite of some words that were written about your work – that you have, in other words, *survived in spite of everything that has been thrown at you* – then you realize that you are truly free to take whatever intellectual risks you believe in. For despite someone's best efforts to kill your ideas off before they infect others, your book, your ideas, are still *out there* attracting often favourable attention elsewhere, while their review is already beginning to languish in the pages of a journal that, in truth, not that many people will ever read.

What's more, even those who do read such a 'review' might well have the nous to realize – especially if they're familiar with any of your previous work – that there might just be more to your ideas than the reviewer has allowed. Truly uncharitable or mean-spirited reviews can backfire magnificently: they generally say rather more about the reviewer than the reviewed.

The risks of becoming embittered by a nasty review are obvious, but they come with the territory. It is therefore part and parcel of the spiritual training of an intellectual warrior/worrier – or any other kind of creative warrior/worrier – not to get dragged down to the level of the reviewer. I try to remember George Bernard Shaw's advice: 'I learned long ago, never to wrestle with a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it.'

A far subtler trap, however, lies in wait for more experienced players of the ideas game. If you think that Rough Criticism represents an ego-seducing trap, then just wait until you meet that bruiser's extremely attractive cousin, Worldly Success. Now, she is a really tricky customer – not least because she can slip through your defences a thousand times more easily than any manifestation of Rough Criticism. On this score, I therefore try to bear in mind a piece of impromptu advice that Charlie Chaplin is reported to have once given to Einstein.

The context was this. The dusty tramp and the dishevelled genius – both of whom constitute such quintessential icons of the twentieth century as to be recognizable to us today even in silhouette – met and developed a friendship in the course of Einstein's visits to work at Caltech in Pasadena, not far from

Hollywood, in the early 1930s. One consequence of this was that Einstein, who often sought to shun the limelight, attended the 1931 Hollywood premiere of Chaplin's film *City Lights*, with his wife, as Chaplin's guests of honour, just a few days after he and Chaplin had first met. As Chaplin and Einstein were being applauded on their way into the premiere of the film, Chaplin said to his guest: 'They cheer me because they all understand me, and they cheer you because no one understands you.' (Which, in its own way, echoes Weizmann's shrewd remark on the comprehensibility, or otherwise, of Einstein's ideas.) Nonplussed by this kind of reception, Einstein asked Chaplin what all this acclamation meant. Chaplin, to his everlasting credit, replied: 'Nothing.' Now, there's a koan worth reflecting on.

I interpret Chaplin's surprising reply not only as succinctly conveying a sensible piece of practical advice but also as intimating a deeper wisdom that these two astonishingly creative men already shared. As a piece of practical advice, I take Chaplin's reply to mean something like, 'You would do well to *regard* all this acclaim as meaning nothing,' because Chaplin knew – must have known – that although critical and popular acclaim seems like the proverbial 'good work if you can get it', and is certainly preferable to getting metaphorically *kicked in the head*, it can also sneak in some time-bomb sorrows of its own while you've let your guard down. For if you find yourself being drawn into the seductive siren song of acclaim for your work too far, then the kicks in the head will hurt all the more when they come, and they will come. Those who live by the cheers will die by the jeers – or, possibly even

worse for such people, they will wither or become bitter from lack of attention when the spotlight simply moves on, as it will. Worldly Success should therefore come wearing a T-shirt that reads: 'Proceed with Caution.' Or perhaps one that displays the popular reality-check adage: 'There's only one thing worse than not getting what you want, and that's getting it.' Alas, like a tanned, well-endowed, conspicuously bra-less young woman I once saw on Mykonos, she often comes wearing one that says 'In Your Dreams', and there is, of course, no end of dreamers who dream of her.

The deeper wisdom that Chaplin was sharing with Einstein surely consisted in this: although critical and popular acclaim is all well and good while it lasts, it's not really the *point*. Rather, the point of any kind of creative work is to put the best you can into the work itself – creativity is its own reward – and let the reception of your work, however it goes, take care of itself; that is out of your hands, and it always will be.

These kinds of reflections take us further into spiritual warrior/worrier territory. Thus, Oppenheimer's beloved *Bhagavad-Gita*, for example, is renowned for its repeated affirmation that we should, on the one hand, act wholeheartedly, but, on the other hand, do so without being attached to the 'fruits of our actions'. My favourite Zen story makes essentially the same point, but does so in a manner that, as befits a Zen story, wrong-foots us altogether:

A Zen student comes to his teacher with tears in his eyes on the third day of a retreat and says: 'Master, I know I've been a difficult student. I've been

lazy, critical, and easily distracted. But in this last period of zazen I had an opening.’ His tears are flowing freely now as he goes on to say: ‘I was suffused with light and joy as I glimpsed the empty nature of my own self and the ultimate oneness of all things.’ Unimpressed, his teacher waves his hand aside and says calmly: ‘Don’t worry, that will pass.’

Zen practitioners like to say that such a student ‘stinks of Zen’. There are worse things in this world to stink of, of course; but, still, this story gets at the idea of ‘not being attached to the fruits of one’s actions’ in a startling and thus memorable way.

On beautiful days such as this, days when it is easy to cultivate one’s equanimity, I try to remember all this stuff; to remind myself to beware of the ego-seducing traps of Acclaim and Worldly Success just as much as those of Rough Criticism and Worldly Failure. I tell myself to try simply to take note of these tricky customers for any useful information or ideas they might be able to give me, but, other than that, to rise above them, leave them to their own devices, and stay focused on developing my own work. I try to remember the motivation that got me into what I’m doing in the first place and to make that my guiding star.

But I also have to acknowledge that, however motivated I might be in general, there will always be some days when it just doesn’t happen. I recall a song I made up under the shower about this once, back in the days when I was still doing my PhD. Many of my spontaneous ‘shower songs’ just go down the

drain with the water and are forgotten about by the time I am dried and dressed, but this one stuck around and I still sing it from time to time to this day.

### **Out for Lunch**

1. I overshot the runway on take-off this morning;  
didn't get up 'til after ten.

By the time I'd showered and breakfasted,  
it was time for midday tennis and then  
time for lunch, time for lunch,  
before I start my working day.

2. Came loose at the moorings before I even woke up;  
proceeded to drift about all day.

After lunch I did some correspondence,  
took a walk to post my letters away,  
far away, far away,  
then I came back and fed the cat.

3. Everybody knows those days when nothing seems to happen;  
your mind just seems to have one of its own.

People ask you questions but you don't have no answers;

your lights are on but there's nobody at home –  
out for lunch, out for lunch,  
can I get him to call you back?

Not every day works out when you're playing the ideas game in the latter-day versions of Plato's Academy. I wonder if Plato had his 'out for lunch' days too?