

On the Popularity of Philosophical Ideas

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Ideas have never conquered the world as ideas, but only by the force they represent. They do not grip men by their intellectual contents, but by the radiant vitality which is given off from them at certain periods. They give off as it were a rich scent which overpowers even the dullest sense of smell. The loftiest and most sublime remains ineffective until the day when it becomes contagious, not by its own merits, but by the merits of the groups of men in whom it becomes incarnate by the transfusion of their blood. (Rolland, 1910-1913: vol. 3, pp. 174-175)

Recently I read the abstract of a paper that will be presented to the Aristotelian Society during May 2024, in which the author riffs on an earlier article of his that, as he puts it, “went viral” in 2019 (Schliesser, 2019, 2024). Now, the title of the earlier essay, “Synthetic Philosophy,” actually sounded like old news to me, so I followed it up online and read it; it was indeed old news. More precisely, it re-bottled an existing idea that had been worked out in different ways by Herbert Spencer in the 19th century, as a scientific

version of Darwinian evolutionary theory, and in 20th and 21st century philosophy by Wilfrid Sellars, Daniel Dennett, Philip Kitcher, and Peter Godfrey-Smith:

By “synthetic philosophy” I mean a style of philosophy that brings together insights, knowledge, and arguments from the special sciences with the aim to offer a coherent account of complex systems and connect these to a wider culture or other philosophical projects (or both). Synthetic philosophy may, in turn, generate new research in the special sciences, a new science connected to the framework adopted in the synthetic philosophy, or new projects in philosophy. So, one useful way to conceive of synthetic philosophy is to discern in it the construction of a scientific image that may influence the development of the special sciences, philosophy, public policy, or the manifest image. (Schliesser, 2019)

Interestingly, a quite different and neo-Kantian version of Synthetic Philosophy was worked out by Ernst Cassirer in the early decades of the 20th century (Luft, 2021). And I myself have compared and contrasted “bottom-up” Analytic philosophy and “top-down” Synthetic philosophy, by way of an analogy with the internal structure of the act or process of reading (Hanna, 2024a). But in any case, all that led me to think more about precisely what it means for a philosophical idea to “go viral” — or, as per the epigraph of this essay, in Romain Rolland’s words, “become contagious” (Rolland, 1910-1913: vol. 3, p. 175)—and thereby become widely popular, famous, or even deeply entrenched in intellectual or sociopolitical culture.

To be sure, the popularity of a philosophical idea is logically independent of its truth: popular ideas, even extremely popular ideas — say, Descartes’s substance dualism, Berkeley’s subjective idealism, Hegel’s absolute idealism, Mill’s Utilitarianism, and Dennett’s materialism or physicalism (Hanna, 2024b)—can be false, or at least importantly flawed like Cartesian or Leibnizian Rationalism and Lockean or Humean Empiricism. And as the witty saying goes, Pragmatism was a great idea in theory but it didn’t work out in practice. But popular ideas can also be true, like Plato’s version of Socratic method, Aristotle’s notion of immanent forms or essences, and Kant’s moral dignitarianism. As Rolland correctly points out, a philosophical idea becomes popular not because of its intellectual merits, but for essentially *non-intellectual* reasons. In turn, it seems to me that there are at least four such reasons.

First, the idea can reinforce already-existing widely held ideas but with a minor change of key, so that it seems to buck the conventional wisdom, but actually doesn’t. Let’s call this *orthodox popularity*. A good contemporary example of orthodox popularity would be Schliesser’s “Synthetic Philosophy” (Schliesser, 2019).

Second, the idea can become a temporary craze that feeds people's emotional needs for The Next Big Thing, like clothing styles, food trends, or movies. Let's call this *faddish popularity*. Indeed,

[i]n a 2012 study, Dr. Berger [i.e., "Jonah Berger, a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania"] and his colleagues analyzed over 7,000 [New York] Times articles to understand sharing behavior. They found that articles evoking high-arousal emotions like awe, anger, surprise and anxiety were more likely to go viral. (NYT, 2022)

A good contemporary example of faddish popularity would be "conceptual engineering" (Chalmers, 2020; Hanna, 2022: pp. 72-85).

Third, the idea can actually be someone else's earlier idea, only now in a new shiny rhetorical wrapper that makes it seem new and amazing, when in fact it's really only a trivial re-formulation of that other person's idea, without a proper citation of the original source. Let's call this *plagiaristic popularity*. A good contemporary example of plagiaristic popularity would be "Experimental Philosophy," aka X-Phi (Knobe and Nichols, 2017), which is really nothing but post-Quinean empiricism with a sociological twist of lemon.

And **fourth**, the idea can surf the tidal wave of fundamental social change arising from large-scale forces over which individuals have little or no control, expressing that process of fundamental social change, encapsulating it, shaping it, and further stimulating it. Let's call that *world-historical popularity*. Good examples would be Marx's and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1848/1969) and the 20th and 21st century emergence, rise, and eventual intellectual and sociocultural domination of what Otto Paans and I have called *the mechanistic worldview* (Hanna and Paans, 2020).

In the first three of these cases, sadly, the popularity of that philosophical idea is actually a form of bullshit (Frankfurt, 1984), and nothing to brag about, although it might well significantly advance the career of the person lionized for creating or discovering that idea.

But what about truly original, revolutionary ideas? By their very nature, such ideas are neither orthodox, nor faddish, nor plagiaristic. In a very few cases, they might become, as a matter of brute contingent luck, faddishly popular. When they have world-historical popularity, like Marx's and Engels's communism and the mechanistic worldview, then they can (help to) change the world, although not necessarily for the better. Nevertheless, since truly original, revolutionary ideas are by definition, new and strange, they're massively more likely, as in the case of the first edition of David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, "[fall] *dead-born from the press*, without reaching such distinction,

as even to excite a murmur among the zealots” (Hume, 1776/2022: p. 6), and be completely ignored. Or even worse, since truly original, revolutionary ideas fly in the face of orthodoxy and conventional wisdom, they might well be angrily criticized and excoriated, and perhaps even banned, censored, or otherwise silenced. In that sense, many or even most truly original, revolutionary philosophical ideas are “dangerous,” perhaps even leading to the punishment or death of the philosopher who first formulates them, as in the case of Socrates, Hypatia, Giordano Bruno, Thomas More, Jan Patocka, and other doomed philosophical iconoclasts (Bradatan, 2015, 2017).

In any case, supposing that you have indeed created or discovered a truly original, revolutionary philosophical idea, then the best you can do is *somehow* get it published, and thereby disseminated or shared, and hope that it doesn’t suffer the fate of Hume’s *Treatise*, or worse. But on the other hand, if it does, by some happy accident, become popular or even famous by surfing the tidal wave of fundamental social change, then that fact shouldn’t be celebrated by you but instead only accepted by you with an ironical, self-deprecatory awareness of the surging, vast ocean of historical reality and of the adverse, sad fate of massively most truly original, revolutionary ideas. Moreover, as the creator or discoverer of that idea, you shouldn’t ever publicly say that you’re “humbled” by all the acclaim, since that’s nothing but *humble bragging* and therefore hypocritical, self-congratulatory bullshit.

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