

A Brief Reflection on Idealism

by
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Forward-looking people all over the world, since the dawn of humanity, have longed for peace in place of war, wisdom in place of ignorance, goodness in place of evil, and love in place of hate. This spiritual idealism, this irrepressible reach for better things, has long supplied the energy for human progress. In modern times, many conscientious individuals have increasingly pointed to Western civilization as the embodiment of science without idealism, politics without principles, wealth without work, pleasure without restraint, knowledge without character, power without conscience, and industry without morality. Although there is much truth in these identifications, it is incorrect to conclude that Western civilization is inherently evil—or worse yet, to generally repudiate science, politics, wealth, pleasure, knowledge, power, and industry.

To avoid reaching these incorrect conclusions, one must hold on to a higher objectivity; one must differentiate the baby from the bath water; one must not become subject to the human tendency toward a quasi-religious zeal of belief. The antidote for a materialist who is devoid of spiritual outlook is not an idealist who excludes facts. Individuals who prefer optimistic illusions to reality can never become wise. Only those who face facts and adjust them to ideals can achieve wisdom. Wisdom embraces both the fact and the ideal. Avoid the temptation to label the expression of an ideologically inconvenient fact as the manifestation of a conspiracy. Beware of the historical sophistry of responding to unbridled materialism with untempered idealism.

Idealists must realize that hand in hand with their greater affinity to ideals is a lesser sense of practicality—just as materialists must recognize the reverse. Spirit and matter are not opposites or enemies, neither is one greater, or more real, than the other. Every person should strive to form a unity of ideals and facts in their consciousness; and, to the extent that this unity cannot be formed, spiritually minded and materially minded individuals must join together to complement each other. If nothing else, idealists should at least acknowledge that if it weren't for "less idealistic" people down through history, the idealists in each generation would have been exterminated by the baser orders of humanity.

The conscious or subconscious vulnerability felt by many idealists leads to fear, and fear corrupts idealism. Fear deadens the higher senses; it clouds the perception of goodness. When idealists don't rise above their fears, they progressively view the world through the eyes of fear; more and more they see only the error and the evil. Without a sure knowledge of the fact of goodness, and a certainty of the truth that goodness always surpasses evil, an idealist will feel a growing emptiness, which leads to despair and desperation. Hate will build, and violence will seem to be the only recourse against an apparently increasingly evil world. The idealist will become a nihilist, the personification of the very antithesis of spiritual ideals.