

A Powerful Idea

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2005 April 25

We tend to view powerful ideas as results, as processes or widely applicable specific conclusions, but following the line of thought of McLuhan, conclusions are carried by a medium, which in my analysis is also an idea, a construction of the mind, and are therefore subordinate to the structures in which the conclusions are expressed. A powerful idea doesn't take the form of a particular result, framework, or process but exists only as a recognition of the existence of frameworks or processes of a general kind. If we consider that the vehicle by which a powerful conclusion is transmitted is as important as the conclusion itself, then one of the most powerful ideas that we derive is that there is a level of abstraction about ideas, a domain of meta-ideas, which impacts the content and form of conclusions, and that we must identify as powerful ideas and analyze the structures that bear conclusions to critically evaluate and appreciate the conclusions, themselves.

Modern biology begins with the application of a historical dialectic to natural conditions resulting in evolution, and this structure is merged with the dichotomous key, an instrument of classification by differences. Modern economics begins with application of measure and mathematical techniques to the analysis of modes of production and exchange and the creation and accumulation of wealth. The presence of these structures is practically invisible. They represent the tableau on which the discourse in each field exists, a precondition of discourse in the field, so we cannot imagine statements in these fields as existing in any other setting. Attempts at statements made on some other tableau would appear nonsensical or outside the discipline in question though the statement might be about the objects of study of the discipline. The choice of a tableau is to some degree arbitrary. One could imagine beginning from scratch an analysis of wealth that was principally historical or a mathematical or statistical biology. (In the case of the historical analysis of wealth, one doesn't have to *imagine* beginning from scratch since Marx began this project a long time ago.) Recognizing the tableau on which a discipline is organized and understanding the preconditions on making claims in a field represent the essence of becoming a contributor to the field and a prerequisite of critical examination of the state of a system of knowledge.

Meta-ideas exist in every area of inquiry and work to organize entire disciplines—in class, we have discussed measure many times in relation to spe-

cific ideas giving measure the character of a meta-idea and setting it free from any particular application—and understanding these meta-ideas not only makes one a better contributor to a discipline but also helps one to look past the meta-ideas and suggest alternative orderings of observations and formulations of knowledge. Looking past meta-ideas is important since the ability to break with a line of reason and suggest a new course is practically the definition of creativity. In short, powerful ideas are meta-ideas, structures that contain and transmit other ideas, not only because meta-ideas find diverse applications but because the process of isolating a meta-idea suggests the possibility of abstraction about meta-ideas, themselves, and the dependence of knowledge on the organizing meta-idea and the possibility of reformulating observation along altogether different lines.