

# Study Guide to *Human Action* by Robert P. Murphy

## Chapter IX. The Role of Ideas

### Chapter Summary

#### 1. Human Reason

Reason distinguishes man from other animals. All action is preceded by thinking. The reasoning employed may be faulty, but, by definition, action is the purposeful attempt to remove uneasiness. It is always an individual, not "society," who thinks. Tradition—primarily through language—allows present actors to incorporate into their own thinking the reasoning of their ancestors. This renders present thinking more productive, just as labor is now more productive because of our inheritance of capital goods created by our forefathers.

#### 2. Worldview and Ideology

A worldview serves as both an interpretation of all things, but also as a guide to action. In this sense a worldview is both an explanation and a technology. Ideology is a narrower term, in that it restricts attention to human interaction over earthly concerns. Religious dogma and even the pure natural sciences thus fall outside the scope of ideology.

Even though the various ideologies are, on the surface, quite incompatible, they all champion the same things for their followers. Every party promises to deliver economic prosperity, (eventual) peace, a reduction in disease, and so forth. Thus their disagreements are not over abstract principles on which compromise is impossible. In contrast to truly religious wars, when it comes to secular (i.e., ideological) conflict there is hope for cooperation, because human society is the great means by which all people can better achieve their differing objectives.

#### *The Fight Against Error*

A popular view holds that an ideology is most successful when it contains contradictory tenets, because after all "life isn't logical." This is completely false. Reason is man's primary tool in the struggle against nature, and it does no good to let action be guided by contradictory beliefs. In this case the action will be in vain, and worse the contradictory belief system may make it difficult to understand why.

The tendency to denounce adherents to rival ideologies as evil or insane is deplorable. Ironically, the allegedly "paranoid" monetary cranks and even Nazi theorists were simply more consistent in applying the principles of commonly held views regarding the benefits of government intervention in the economy.

### 3. Might

Human action creates society, and human action is guided by ideology. In this sense, society is a product of ideology. The Marxists therefore have things exactly backwards, since they assert that the material forces of the social order condition the ideology of the day.

Might is the power to direct the actions of others. Rule is the exercise of might in the political arena. Even though a ruler relies on violence to punish dissenters, it is ultimately ideology rather than guns that keeps a particular person or party in power. Without a group who voluntarily obey his orders, the tyrant would be a lone individual who at most could harm a few dozen people. In this loose sense, all governments rest on popular opinion.

#### *Traditionalism as an Ideology*

Traditionalism is an ideology that considers good and expedient the value judgments, customs, and procedures handed down from ancestors. Often the "traditional" doctrines are not really the ones held by ancestors.

### 4. Meliorism and the Idea of Progress

The notions of progress and retrogression only make sense in the context of an actor's plan. Evolution in the biological sense is purposeless and hence it is impermissible to view creatures as gradually improving over time and turning into "higher" forms of life.

The fatal flaw of 18th- and 19th-century rationalists and (classical) liberals was their faith in the decency and wisdom of the common man. These reformers attributed the barbarism of human history to the political power of the aristocrats and kings. Since democracy allowed the direct rule of the many, these enlightened thinkers considered social progress inevitable. What they failed to predict was that the masses were quite fallible and could fall sway to horrible ideologies.

#### Why It Matters

In previous chapters, Mises made the case for reason, a single system of logic for the human mind, and so forth. In the present chapter, Mises argues that ideas control human destiny. Thus, not only is it sensible to discuss ideas and their relative merits; it is vital to do so because civilization depends on them.

#### Technical Notes

- (1) The Marxists believe that ideologies (except Marxism of course) are simply adapted to justify the economic and social order of a given period. For example, once the material conditions of production rendered feudalism unsustainable, modern capitalism burst onto the scene. In the wake of this "real" transformation, the intangible moral, legal, and political superstructures had to change in order to maintain the rule of the capitalists, the new oppressors of the proletariat. Mises of course believes just the opposite, namely that the Industrial Revolution could not

occur until political and legal reforms gave the people of Western Europe a degree of autonomy from their rulers.

- (2) When Mises writes (p. 192) that one must guard against the incorporation of the idea of progress in biological evolution, he is limiting himself to the scope of what the natural sciences can teach us. The accepted modern statement of Darwinian theory holds that it is a naïve confusion to view evolution as a billion-year process in which homo sapiens are eventually reached. Without positing an actor (such as God) who designed the process, there is no goal and hence the term "progress" is inapplicable. In the present day, bacteria can certainly thrive in many areas of the planet, and so (from a purely biological viewpoint) there is no sense in which humans are more "evolved" than the bacteria are.

## Study Questions

### 1. Human Reason

- What is the relation between thinking and action?
- Why is it always the individual who thinks?
- What is language? Why is it important?
- What stimulates intellectual progress?

### 2. Worldview and Ideology

- What are the differences between worldview and ideology?
- Why is it fallacious to believe that one group can only prosper at the expense of other groups?
- What is the definition of a party?

Comment: "The main objective of praxeology and economics is to substitute consistent correct ideologies for the contradictory tenets of popular eclecticism."

- What is a monetary crank?
- How can we fight error?

### 3. Might

- What is might?
- To what does someone owe his might?
- What is the difference between a government that uses violent oppression and a gangster who overpowers a weaker person?

- Can minority rule endure?

#### **4. Meliorism and the Idea of Progress**

- What are the definitions of progress and retrogression?
- Men err very often. How is this compatible with democracy?

Comment: "There is but one yardstick for the appraisal of human action: whether or not it is fit to attain the ends aimed at by acting men."