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Book Review

**Steven Poole, *RETHINK – The Surprising History of New Ideas*,
Penguin Random House, Pages: 314, 2016, Price: GBP 9.99
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Introduction

In these neoliberal times of intensifying competition, developing new business concepts, ideas and models is of great importance to business leaders and managers. It is professed in many quarters that discoveries and inventions, induced by creativity is the way to beat competition. Institutions of higher education, management consultants and trainers the world over invest heavily in enhancing creativity among their charges for which they employ a range of techniques such as positive thinking, meditation, emotional intelligence and intuitive and lateral thinking.

In this emerging context, there are several questions that naturally arise: *How does creativity come about? What induces new ideas and thinking? And, how could creativity be sustained?* While different answers to these questions have been offered by experts, they continue to draw the attention of academics and practitioners owing to their relevance in driving organisations towards a competitive advantage. In this backdrop, the treatise presented by Steven Poole in his recent (2016) book *RETHINK, The Surprising History of New Ideas*, is

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intellectually stimulating and informative; it is certainly an off the beaten track treatment of the subject.

The Theme

According to Poole “rethink is to think about an idea again; to change how you think about it” (p. 1). Setting the central theme for the book, the author informs: “The book is about ideas whose time has come. They were born hundreds or thousands of years ago. But their time is now. Many of them spent a lot of time being ridiculed or suppressed, until someone saw them in a new light...They are being rediscovered, and upgraded...” (p. 3). Commenting on their reappearance, he says they are coming back at the cutting edge of diverse disciplines. Commenting on creativity Poole further states that “...it is often defined as the ability to combine existing ideas from different fields. But it can also be the imaginative power of realising that a single overlooked idea has something to it after all” (p. 3). He emphasises “...We are living in an age of innovation. But it is also an age of rediscovery. Because surprisingly often, it turns out, innovation depends on old ideas” (p. 3).

This undoubtedly is a novel approach to the subject of creativity. The standpoint taken here is that knowledge is *finite* as opposed to *ad infinitum*. Knowledge arises in association with the socio-political environment which is in a state of flux. Knowledge does not arise linearly but multi-directionally and multi-dimensionally. Everything conceivable about the physical world has been thought of, spoken about or acted upon over the millennia. Further, this accumulated knowledge is contained in the deep recesses of the mind and will emerge as new ideas in response to external stimuli from time to time. It follows that we operate within a known realm of knowledge and without the intervention of any super power. Our thoughts of today are largely manifestations of the past, i.e. ‘history repeats itself.’ However, the intricate dynamics associated with rethinking is complex and remains largely unknown.

Poole takes a materialist standpoint in the current treatise. His thoughts are in alignment with the teachings of some of the free thinkers from the East “... Our brain is the result of many, many millennia (p. 7); ... the mind has evolved through thousands and thousands of years.... You are the history of mankind, you are the story of mankind” (Krishnamurti, 1980, p. 23).

Organisation and Contents

The book consists of fourteen chapters: Introduction, Part I (Thesis- four chapters), Part II (Antithesis-five chapters) and Part III (Prognosis-four chapters).

The introductory chapter (pp. 1-14) titled The ‘Age of Rediscovery’ gives a holistic overview of the book. It concludes: “...the best way forward can be to go into reverse. And the best new ideas are often old ones... that even cover micro-surgery and modern warfare” (p. 11).

Thesis (pp. 15-91) carries the central argument that old ideas can turn out to be the source of new thinking, creativity and innovation, which is explained in the next four chapters. In the first of these the author spells out how old thinking will find solutions to new circumstances. In the next, he shows how an old idea can become relevant again with the discovery of a new piece of the puzzle. The third chapter, titled ‘Game Changers’, presents how innovation could result from reviving an old idea in a different context, i.e., using old pieces in a new game. This segment concludes on a cautious note in which the author argues that an old idea might become viable only when attitudes of people change. He asks, *Are we nearly there yet?*

Antithesis (pp. 95-216) argues that what seems ridiculous is often as important as what seems sensible. This refers to ideas of an opposite nature which still cannot be discarded. In the chapter ‘Something New under the Suns(s)’ the author contends that not every idea has been thought of before. There are new ones. However, even the apparently novel usually has more of the past in it than is often credited. The next chapter informs that some ideas keep recurring even though it might never be possible to confirm them. Then there are ideas that return though they should have stayed dead (“zombies”, p. 140). Next, the author argues that the return of a wrong idea can be better than no idea at all. This is because it can act as a stepping stone to new ideas that may emerge later. The final chapter discusses how the “placebo effect” (p. 189) works, i.e., emergence of old ideas which are so powerful that it doesn’t even matter whether they are true or false.

Prognosis (pp. 219-216), the final part of the book, is about charting the future. The first chapter titled ‘Utopia Redux’ examines which old ideas could be resurrected to improve our world right now. ‘Beyond Good and Evil’ looks at what evil ideas from the past might be worth another look, and, which ideas of ours will look horrific to our descendants. The penultimate chapter questions as to what else

might we be wrong about today. It also examines how we should rethink our ideas about ideas.

In the concluding chapter, 'Epilogue', the author laments that though our culture is gutted with narratives of bygone wars and dramatizations of vanished societies it has paid little attention to history's great struggles of thought. He is of the view that any culture that thinks the intellectual past is irrelevant cannot have much hope of future success. The book concludes with an earnest appeal to the reader to hark back to the past which will be the gateway to present and future discoveries and inventions.

The chapters form an excellent sequence, each with an identity of its own progressing smoothly to the next so that the book, as a whole, reflects synergy. Its simple language and style induces one to read the full book but with occasional breaks owing to the heaviness of the substance covered. The method adopted by the writer is to substantiate the sub-themes of the chapters with historical evidence, anecdotes and synthesis. *RETHINK* is complete with notes to each chapter, a comprehensive bibliography and an extensive index that reflects the hard work that had gone into completing the book.

A Few Vistas

The book opens with the story of electric cars (pp. 1-2). A vivid description is given on how the first known electric car (hummingbird) built in the nineteenth century (1837) claiming economy of space, less noise and polluting exhaust was driven out of business by the drivers of London's horse-drawn cabs on counts of high incidence of breakdowns and accidents. However, discovery of large reservoirs of fossil fuel resulted in low-priced gasoline-powered cars (of Henry Ford fame) ruling the twentieth century. Much later, with the depletion of fossil oil reserves, air pollution and discovery of lithium-ion technology (used in batteries), Elton Musk of Tesla Motors reintroduced the electric car in 2004. Observe the flux of related occurrences over large spans of time!

The book closes with an account of the renewed interest in space travel that re-emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century: Russia's announced plans for new manned space missions; China's aim to land a probe on the dark side of the moon and NASA's roadmap for putting people on the Red Planet. In 2015 NASA announced, "...Like the Apollo Program...we are developing the capabilities necessary to get there, land there, and live there..." (p. 286) Despite the recent

efforts at implanting, according to Poole, space mission has never been a new idea. He recalls ancients, Hero of Alexandria (first century), Lucien of Samosata (second century) and H G Wells (nineteenth century).

Between these revealing cases the reader is taken on an interesting journey to meet a galaxy of giants from diverse fields ranging from biology, cosmology, political thought, business theory, and philosophy, among many others. The book consists of a compendium of rich information about their thoughts and deeds over the millennia.

Of the many anecdotes that adorn the book the story of frozen food is worth repeating. Sir Francis Bacon, the British politician, the diplomat and author, while on a coach ride on an evening of heavy snowfall was struck with the idea of "...what if you could preserve meat with ice?" (p. 66). Immediately, he had got a chicken killed and the carcass covered with ice, and having been exposed to cold weather had caught a chill and died. Four centuries later this idea was activated by Clarence Birdseye, who, while being in the frozen landscapes of Labrador, Canada, had observed the Inuit people hanging fresh fish outside in minus zero temperatures which were frozen solid. This led to his developing the deep freezer which was followed by the General Seafood Corporation. However, modest Birdseye was of the view that Eskimos had used deep freezing for centuries and also scientists in Europe had conducted many related experiments. The anecdote illustrates the commonality of knowledge from time immemorial and how they manifest in different forms as through flashes of inspiration.

In passing, Poole narrates how Pfizer discovered that the blue pill Viagra which was originally introduced as a remedy for angina patients was subsequently developed for an alternative purpose as the company noticed that the spare pills were strangely never returned by patients – "using old pieces in a new game" (p. 53). And, ancient mind training methods of Buddhism and Taoism are repackaged and sold as stress management remedies for today's busy managers – "when new circumstances require old thinking!" (p. 30). Further, Poole contributes to the debate of knowing the reality, rationalism (pure thought) vs. empiricism (experience or experiment based). Drawing from Eugene Wigner, James Clark Maxwell and Albert Einstein, he argues that rationalism (armchair thinking) continues to play a dominant method of knowing.

Such is the vastness and depth of aspects covered in the book.

Readership

RETHINK is both informative and inspirational. Though a cursory glance may suggest that the book is for general reading purposes, closer examination reveals its relevance for those who intend to make a positive change in society such as researchers, entrepreneurs and business leaders. Managers who are in constant touch with them in organisations will also benefit as it makes them understand them better. *RETHINK* is undoubtedly an excellent supplementary reader for those pursuing master's level studies in management. Further, the contents of the book will be of use for undergraduate level instructors in designing courses of study such as strategy, entrepreneurship and modern management methods.

Suggestions

It will be relevant to express a few thoughts that may be of value in future editions of the publication.

Firstly, an introduction to the main segments of the book, viz. thesis, antithesis and prognosis, will facilitate easier understanding of the contents. Secondly, early on in the book the author states that it would be naïve to imagine that there have never been any new discoveries or ideas. He also says that what is conceived as new usually “has more of the past in it than is often credited...” (p. 95). This results in confusion as the distinction between *old ideas* and *new* have not been substantially revealed. Finally, a section on how and under what conditions creativity arises in individuals, i.e., discussion of its psychic and behavioural aspects, would add value to future versions of the book.

Conclusion

RETHINK - The Surprising History of New Ideas is a publication that is ahead of our times. It is a well-researched treasure trove of a myriad of experiences of mankind over millennia. It is an effort to integrate instead of differentiate knowledge. Careful reading makes one realise that there is nothing that can be claimed as my *discovery or invention*. Instead, new ideas are present forms of manifestations of innumerable past contributions linked to intricate webs of interrelations. This realisation makes one tentative and humble. It also encourages selfless effort to make this a better world to live in. This, I perceive, would be the larger purpose of this publication.

About the Author

Steven Poole is the much acclaimed author of non-fiction, viz. *Trigger Happy*, *Unspeak*, *You Aren't What You Eat* and *Who Touched Thought in My Thought Shower*, among others. He is known for his original and thought provoking ideas and lively presentation style. Poole is a regular contributor to *Guardian*, the *New Statesman* and *Wall Street Journal* in the areas of ideas, culture, language and society.

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