Preface

The thoughts that come out of our minds can make us seem out of our minds.

Some of our most potent ideas reach beyond reason, received wisdom, and common sense. They lurk at chthonic levels, emerging from scientifically inaccessible, rationally unfathomable recesses. Bad memories distort them. So do warped understanding, maddening experience, magical fantasies, and sheer delusion. The history of ideas is patched with crazy paving. Is there a straight way through it – a single story that allows for all the tensions and contradictions and yet makes sense?

The effort to find one is worthwhile because ideas are the starting point of everything else in history. They shape the world we inhabit. Outside our control, impersonal forces set limits to what we can do: evolution, climate, heredity, chaos, the random mutations of microbes, the seismic convulsions of the Earth. But they cannot stop us reimagining our world and labouring to realize what we imagine. Ideas are more robust than anything organic. You can blast, burn, and bury thinkers, but their thoughts endure.

To understand our present and unlock possible futures, we need true accounts of what we think and of how and why we think it: the cognitive processes that trigger the reimaginings we call ideas; the individuals, schools, traditions, and networks that transmit them; the external influences from culture and nature that colour, condition, and tweak them. This book is an attempt to provide such an account. It is not meant to be comprehensive. It deals only with ideas from the past that are still around today, forming and informing our world, making
and misleading it. By ‘ideas’ I mean thoughts that are products of imagination – exceeding experience and excelling mere anticipation. They are different from ordinary thoughts not only because they are new but because they involve seeing what has never before been seen. Those covered in this book may take the form of visions or inspiration, but are different from mental ‘trips’ – incoherent transports or ecstasies – or mental music (unless or until words are set to it) because they constitute models for changing the world. My subtitle, including ‘What We Think’, is meant seriously. Some historians will call this ‘presentism’ and deplore it, but I use it only as a principle of selection, not a lens through which to refract light from the past to fit the present. To avoid misunderstanding, I may have to say that by speaking of ‘what we think’ I do not mean to refer to all the mental occurrences or processes we call thoughts – only to the ideas from the past that we still think about: what we think in the sense of the mental armoury we have inherited for confronting enduring or new problems. ‘We’, to whom I refer, are not everyone. By using the word I mean to invoke ideas that have appealed beyond their places of origins and have been adopted by all – or nearly all – over the world, in all – or nearly all – cultures. They have dissenters as well as adherents, but you cannot dissent from an idea you have not thought about. Many, perhaps most people, are barely aware of and utterly uninterested in most of the selected ideas, which, however, are part of the background of shared wisdom or folly against which even the indifferent lead their lives.

In three respects, mine is unlike any previous writer’s attempt to narrate the history of ideas. First, I include the underexplored problem of how and why we have ideas in the first place: why, by comparison with other, selectively similar animals, our imaginations bristle with so many novelties, probe so far beyond experience, and picture so many different versions of reality. I try to use revelations from cognitive science to expose the faculties that make us, among comparable species, exceptionally productive of ideas. Readers uninterested in theoretical pourparlers can skip to p. 33.

Second, instead of following the usual routine and relying only on written records, I start the story in deep layers of evidence, reconstructing thoughts of our Palaeolithic ancestors and even, in the limited degree the sources permit, reaching for ideas that came out of the minds of
cognate or preceding species of hominins and hominids. Among revelations that will, I hope, surprise most readers are: the antiquity of much of the toolkit of ideas on which we rely; the subtlety and profundity of the thinking of early *Homo sapiens*; and how little we have added to the stock of ideas we inherited from the remote past.

Finally, I depart from the convention of writing the history of ideas as if it were a parade of the thoughts of individual thinkers. I cannot avoid mentioning Confucius and Christ, Einstein and Epicurus, Darwin and Diogenes. But in this book, the disembodied ideas are the heroes and the villains. I try to follow their migrations in and out of the minds that conceived and received them. I do not think that ideas are autonomous. On the contrary, they do not – because they cannot – operate outside minds. But they seem intelligible to me only if we acknowledge that genius is just part of the systems that encourage them, and that circumstances, cultural contexts, and environmental constraints, as well as people, play their parts in the story. And I am interested as much in the transmission of ideas, through media that sometimes pollute and mutate them, as in their parturition – which is never immaculate.

There is no one way of tracking ideas across time and cultures, because in pace, direction, and means their migrations are so various. Sometimes they spread like stains, getting fainter and shallower as they go; sometimes they creep like lice, drawing attention to themselves by irritating their hosts into awareness. Sometimes they seem to fall like leaves on a windless day, and rot for a while before they start anything new. Sometimes they get airborne, zooming in erratic swarms and alighting in unpredictable places, or they succumb to the wind and get blown where it listeth. Sometimes they behave like atomic particles, popping up simultaneously in mutually distant places in defiance of normal laws of motion.

The story matches the matrix of history in general, as ideas, like cultures, multiply and diverge, pullulate and perish, exchange and reconverge, without ever – in any sustained fashion – progressing or developing or evolving, or gaining in simplicity or complexity, or fitting any other formula.

In the early phases of the story, all the ideas we know about seem to be the common property of humankind, carried, unforgotten, from a single culture of origin over time and across migrants’ changing
environments. Increasingly, however, for reasons I try to explore, some regions and some cultures demonstrate peculiar inventiveness. The focus of the book therefore narrows, first to privileged parts of Eurasia, later to what we conventionally call the West. Toward the end of the book, other parts of the world figure mainly as receptors of ideas most of which originate in Europe and North America. I hope no reader mistakes this for myopia or prejudice: it is just a reflection of the way things were. Similarly, the globe-wide perspective and shifting focus of earlier chapters are the results not of political correctness or cultural relativism or anti-Eurocentrism, but of the reality of a world in which cultural exchanges happened in different directions. I hope readers will notice and credit the fact that throughout the book I explore non-Western contributions to ideas and intellectual movements commonly or properly regarded as Western in origin. I do so not for the sake of political correctness but in deference to the truth. Even in the long passages that focus on the West, the book is not primarily about Western ideas but about those that, wherever they originated, have spread so widely as to become fully intelligible, for good and ill, only as part of the intellectual heritage of humankind. Equally, obviously, most of the thinkers I mention were male, because the book is about one of the many areas of human endeavour in which one sex has been disproportionately preponderant. I hope and expect that historians of twenty-first-century ideas, when they get round to the subject with the benefits of hindsight, will properly be able to mention a lot of women.

In each chapter, I try to keep commonly conceived categories distinct, dealing separately with political and moral thinking, epistemology and science, religion and suprarational or subrational notions. In most contexts, the distinctions are, at best, only partly valid. Respecting them is a strategy of convenience and I have tried to make the interchanges, overlaps, and blurred edges apparent at every stage.

Compression and selection are necessary evils. Selection always leaves some readers fuming at the omission of whatever seems more important to them than to the author: I ask their indulgence. The ideas I identify and select will, at least at the margins, be different from those other historians might want to put into a book of this kind were they to try to write one: I rely on every writer’s prerogative – which is not to have to write other writers’ books for them. Compression is in some
ways a self-defeating device, because the swifter the pace of a book, the more slowly readers must go to take in all of it. But it seems better to engage readers’ time with concision than waste it with dilatation. I should make one further principle of selection clear: this book is about ideas, understood as merely mental events (or perhaps cerebral ones – though for reasons that will become clear I prefer not to use the term and wish to retain, at least provisionally, a distinction between mind and brain). Though I try to say something about why each idea is important, readers mainly interested in the technologies that ideas trigger or the movements they inspire need to look elsewhere.

The pages that follow garner a lot of work dispersed over many years: from various books I have written, dozens of articles in different journals or collaborative works, and scores of papers and lectures delivered at assorted academic venues. Because I have devoted a lot of attention in the past to environmental history and the history of material culture, it may look as if I have switched to a new approach, via the mind. But minds mediated or originated almost all the evidence we have about the human past. Mental behaviours shape our physical actions. Culture starts in the mind and takes shape when minds meet, in the learning and examples that transmit it across generations. I have always thought that ideas are literally primordial, and occasionally I have foregrounded them, especially in *Truth: A History* (1997), an attempt at a typology of techniques various cultures have relied on to tell truth from falsehood; *Ideas* (2003), a collection of very brief essays, of between 300 and 500 words each, in which I tried to isolate some important notions – 182 of them, almost all of which reappear in various ways in the present book; and *A Foot in the River* (2015), a comparison of biological and cultural explanations of cultural change. Though some readers of *Civilizations* (2001), in which I approached global history through biomes instead of using countries or communities or regions or civilizations as units of study, and of *The World: A History* (2007) have told me I am a materialist, ideas hover and swerve through those books, too, stirring the mixture, impelling events. Here, I put what I know of the history of ideas together in an unprecedented way, weaving strands into a global narrative, and threading among them mental events I have never touched before. The publisher’s editors – Sam Carter, Jonathan Bentley-Smith, and Kathleen McCully – have helped a lot, as did four
anonymous academic readers. At every stage, I have gathered advice and useful reactions from too many people to mention – especially from the undergraduates who over the last few years have followed my courses on the history of ideas at the University of Notre Dame, and have worked so hard to put me right. In combining the results, I benefited uniquely from Will Murphy’s suggestions. ‘I want you’, he said, ‘to write a history of the human imagination.’ That still seems an unimaginably big imagination for me to picture. If such a history is possible, what follows is or includes a small contribution toward it.

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