

## ESSAY 4 -THIRD IDEA

### 'Vision'

We initially introduced into our thinking Hume's idea that **the foundation of all government is 'opinion'** and his analysis of the concept of 'opinion' into three elements to give us a starting point in how we can think about the question of the 'collapse of democracy'. This first idea is that the foundation of government is '**opinion**' in the form of opinion of interest, opinion of right to power, and opinion of right to property. We took this idea centred on the concept of 'opinion' as the point of departure for our thinking.

Next, and keeping in mind the question about which we wish to have a way of thinking, we turned to the 'climate of opinion', an idea revived by Whitehead and Becker, and for the metaphorical expression required to grasp and convey that *invisible* 'sense' or 'feeling' of opinion which shapes thoughts of an age.

The idea that the 'climate of opinion' about government influences, and possibly even governs, how opinions held by people in a society translates into effects on type of government, through supporting the (often unstated and so implicit) positions about government of specific parties seeking power, gave us the second idea for thinking with. This second idea is that a '**climate of opinion**', the generality of opinion, the prevailing attitude or influence of a period, shapes government.

Thus, for constructing a **Web of Ideas**, we now have selected two ideas with which to work on the question we have posed for the purpose of these *Exercises for Thinking Experiences*.

At this point we need to find a link between the individual minds holding 'opinions' and the 'climate of opinion' of the collectivity of a people.

### Prelude

We will sense in a few moments of thinking that the 'linkage' we need is not a simple matter of one-way cause-and-effect. We will see that influences flow both ways, from individual to collective *and* from collective to individual. We can observe daily such back-and-forth flows in the realm

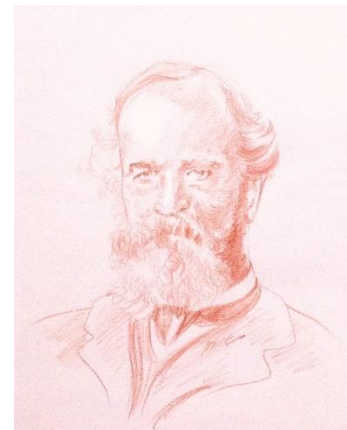
of social media as people's attitudes and stances on topical matters wax and wane in response to so-called 'influencers'.

Further, the metaphor of 'climate of opinion' is a good one for our purposes. It does not commit the fallacy of ascribing 'a mind' to the collective as is often done in discussions. How often, for example, have you heard people talk, in effect, *as if* organisations think? Only individuals have minds and can think. Collectives, even in the form of organisations, do not have a mind and, therefore, do not think as such. Consequently, the collective outcome that is a 'climate of opinion' is an aggregation of individual opinions.<sup>i</sup>

Thus, the point-of-view we will select for our purposes here is that a 'climate of opinion' emerges in the social process of aggregation of *individual* opinions. Both the aggregation process and the outcomes, in turn, *re-reflect* back on individual opinion: individual opinions are shaped in various ways and to various extents by the aggregation process and the resulting aggregations.<sup>ii</sup> The individual is, nevertheless, positioned as centrally in this way of thinking.<sup>iii</sup> On this basis, we turn therefore to the individual person for the source of individual opinion.

## Orientation

In looking for a source of thinking *within* the person we recall the point about thinking being invisible and the requirement for metaphorical expressions to get hold of this idea. Accordingly, we turn to the concept of '**vision**' as formulated by William James (1842-1910) to help us explore further the source of the opinions of individual people and of the overall 'climate of opinion' across a people.



William James © Mike O'Donnell

We should warn at this point that 'vision' is a term which has been trivialised and much abused in organisations by people doing strategy work 'ticking boxes'. Lofty goals and meaningless content inserted under the obligatory heading of 'vision'. *This is not what James's 'vision' is about.* When attention is paid to how James defined 'vision' and what he meant by it, we have a useful idea for thinking about ourselves in our various roles and about our society as our environment and so we will avail of this concept for thinking with.

By a person's '*vision*' James, using metaphorical expressions as he must for conveying such invisibles, means:

“...modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life... and on the whole preferred – there is no other truthful word – as one’s best working attitude”.<sup>iv</sup>

Our ‘vision’, as our *preference as to our best working attitude about and towards the world in which we live*, is our *sense or feeling* of ‘how the world works’. It is, as James put it, ‘how we define the world’.<sup>v</sup> He considers that our vision is “the great fact about [us]” and is “forced by [our] total character and experience”.<sup>vi</sup>

The emphasis on *preference* in James’s version of ‘vision’ is important for us. Preference as to ‘ones best working attitude’ can be conscious or unconscious, deliberate and intentional or accidental and arbitrary. The question arising is: are we conscious that our leaning or disposition is or can be a preference or we do we just accept what has happened to us as we develop?

Accordingly, our visions merit thinking about in themselves not least because, as visions govern our behaviours, for its consequences as revealed in our behaviours. Visions are who we are and who we consciously or unconsciously want to be. Surfacing and exploring visions is a way to understanding others and ourselves.

Evocatively expressed by James, ‘our preference as to our best working attitude’ provides a link we need between the ‘opinion’ of individuals and the ‘climate of opinion’ to give us a useful tool of thought for thinking about the question of interest to us in these *Exercises for Thinking Experiences*.

Thus, we will use the concept of ‘vision’ to think about an aspect of human affairs in the political realm, that is, type of government: *Preferences of a people as to their best working attitude about and towards government* provide grounding for the climate of opinion about government; and *climate of opinion about government in a society shapes government* and, thereby, provides for the *foundation of government on opinion* in a society.

Our next step, therefore, is to explore the concept of ‘vision’ in relation specifically to our concern about government.

## **Concept for Thinking With**

To start at this point we combine James’s concept of ‘vision’ with the ‘climate of opinion’ being made up of the ‘opinion’ of the individual members of a society. This brings us to the source of those opinions in the visions of the individual persons in the society.

Thomas Sowell elaborates on the nature and role of 'visions' in political, social, and economic affairs.<sup>vii</sup> We draw on his analysis for our third idea for thinking about the question we are using for the purpose of these *Exercises for Thinking Experiences*.



Thomas Sowell © Mike O'Donnell

Since our visions are invisible, they are, as Sowell puts it, the 'silent shapers of our thoughts'.<sup>viii</sup> They are the deep down, 'pre-analytic cognitive acts', of people - they are what we sense or feel *before* we conduct analysis and construct our thoughts for expression; they underpin our thinking *before* we take up positions;<sup>ix</sup> and they *set* our "agenda for both thought and action."<sup>x</sup>

We all have our visions of the political, social, economic, private, moral, and religious aspects of human affairs. While we are just focussing on government here, these underpin different decisions about different aspects of society.

Since our visions are, as James metaphorically expressed it, modes of '*feeling the whole push*' and '*seeing the whole drift*' of life, they are for us *the underlying unity of our positions* across what on the surface appears to be diverse and unrelated issues.<sup>xi</sup> There is a logical consistency to visions even if people have not investigated this logic despite their commitment to them.<sup>xii</sup> This is the power and role of visions in our living.

Thus, because our visions differ and, in the sense of James, *we are our visions*, they are the source of major conflicts of opinion. Conflicts sourced in visions can be most bitter and hard fought, sometimes destroying societies, as history shows us in the realm of the political and the religious. This is because, as Sowell says, "...we sacrifice for our visions and sometimes, if need be, face ruin rather than betray them."<sup>xiii</sup>

Sowell observes that a curious thing about political opinions is "...how often the same people line up on opposite sides of different issues" although the issues in themselves have no intrinsic connections.<sup>xiv</sup> We see this demonstrated clearly as the world of politics today has become increasingly polarised. The public phenomena of 'Brexit' and Trump' are, in effect, revealing underlying 'logics' that give unity to positions about diverse political, social, and economic, issues.

Sowell warns: "We will do almost anything for our visions except think about them."<sup>xv</sup> This is for the simple reason that it would mean thinking about ourselves - something we are generally loath to do and something

we are usually not very good at without practice. Again, 'Brexit' and 'Trump' manifestations of visions are showing the absolute commitment of people to their visions as they take sides 'for' and 'against'.

'The highest possible stage in moral culture is when we recognise that we ought to control our thoughts.'

Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871

Here, however, since our purpose is developmental, we must think about visions - not just those of others but our own too - as we want to understand not just others but also to understand ourselves.

Now we are exploring *how we think* in order to understand how the climate of opinion in which we live arises.

My 'vision', as what I believe about *how the world works*, is the 'place' from where I operate about many and very different matters in my living. A 'vision' is, therefore, not a daydream, fantasy, hope, or other such things, it is real for me. It is, for example, my *sense* or *feeling* of *causation* in the world <sup>xvi</sup>. Therefore, if social causation proceeds as in my vision, then certain other consequences follow for me and others.<sup>xvii</sup>

Thus, important implications for our question about government flow from our visions since opinions about government ultimately arise from our visions of how the world works. These visions, given effect in opinions, spread across society with consequences which may last from decades to centuries, as we saw with the idea of 'climates of opinion'. (Consider the role of visions for judges, who like anybody else, operate from their particular personal visions.)

A key role which our visions play in our living is that they fill in the unavoidable gaps in our knowledge and understanding. They work in a way somewhat, but not entirely, analogous to the 'perceptual filling-in' by our visual systems which, when our eyes have a blind-spot, insert 'the' missing 'information'. The 'the', of course, can be problematic and result in bad as well as good outcomes.

There is a crucial point about our thinking to attend to here. Perceptual filling in is carried out by visual neurons and their 'decision', once made, is irreversible – what is perceived is irrevocable.<sup>xviii</sup> This is a biological evolutionary phenomenon. We have no control over what the visual system does.

Cognitively visions 'fill in' the gaps in our knowledge or understanding. The thoughts which arise from them, however, are potentially revisable on reflection and consideration. That depends on how reflective and thoughtful we are at any moment. We may, therefore, be more dogmatic than is

warranted about some matter when we are unreflective and unaware of our visions and the interpolation role they play *in* our thinking.

People do not like 'gaps' or 'vacuums' and, when one presents itself, feel unsettled and fill in what is felt to be missing with whatever is available. Our visions are available to us for moments like these. It's the role they play – or rather we use them for – good or bad. We hear this all the time around us as when people say, after something has happened, 'God works in mysterious ways' as the way they understand how the world works. And we do it too. We do this when faced with the complex questions, such as the one about government, although we may regard ourselves as more thoughtful.

Regarding the specific question we are concerned with here, conflicts of visions about government, by the very nature of 'visions, would seem to dominate the long-term waves of the climate of opinion. There is a certain consistency of opinion reflective of certain visions over the long run. This consistency may be veiled, however, by conflicts of interests, clashes of personalities, emotional reactions, and other factors which appear to dominate over the short run. We have to pull away the veil.

In the short run, for example, individuals or organisations with special interests can exploit visions to mobilize public support for and against particular policies by playing with various ideas, as currently would seem to be the case with Trump and Johnson as heads of governments. In the long run, however, such individuals and organisations, while themselves pursuing their narrow interests, are only the carriers of ideas in the grand sweep of human affairs.<sup>xix</sup>

As John Maynard Keynes, speaking about economic policies, put it:

"Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slave of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval... soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil." <sup>xx</sup>

Thus, while people may be impatient about exploring their personal visions – a kind of exercise frequently dismissed as of no practical or immediate value – the matter of visions is of importance for them. The climate of opinion in which they operate is shaped by underlying social visions and by particular conflicts of visions. We observe the effects of such a situation all

around us today and this partly prompted the question about the collapse of democracy for the purposes of these *Exercises for Thinking Experiences*.

The way of thinking we are constructing and, in the instant case, the idea of 'visions' in particular are applicable to other areas of human affairs, including business. Any people in business who believe their thinking about their business is naturally immune to their visions or the climate of opinion are deluding themselves. Any time they are surprised by unintended outcomes - good or bad - of their actions their surprise reveals having some particular vision, their invisible *sense* or *feeling* about *how the world works*.

As Sowell says:

"The effects of visions do not depend on their being articulated, or even on decision-makers' being aware of them." <sup>xxi</sup>

He notes that

"... when there is a conflict of visions, those most powerfully affected by a particular vision may be the least aware of its underlying assumptions – or least interested in stopping to examine such theoretical questions when there are urgent 'practical' issues to be confronted, crusades to be launched, or values to be defended at all costs." <sup>xxii</sup>

People may be unaware of their visions, or may lose sight of them, because the contrast between conflicts of visions and conflicts of interest. The parties whose interests are directly affected understand how they are affected, in terms of what they may gain or lose, when interests are involved. The general public may not understand as the interested parties may be, as they often are, at pains to disguise their interests about which they themselves have clarity. <sup>xxiii</sup>

Visions relating to the political, as well as social and economic, realms of human affairs are grounded on assumptions about nature of human beings, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of social processes. Sowell explores these foundations in depth using two broad categories, which he labels the 'unconstrained vision' and the 'constrained vision', for convenience. The visions of most people are some jumble of these visions, some confusion of a sense of how world works, some ad-hoc, inconsistent grafting of one on to the other. The result is innumerable combinations and permutations of just these two visions across people.

Although a continuum, the polar contrast of these categories is convenient for getting to know what visions encompass in practice. Also, we can only consider them here in the briefest terms and sharpest outlines.

The unconstrained vision has human nature as something changeable, even 'perfectible' in the sense of continually improvable with any limits to the capabilities of people unknown, and that means exist or can be found to improve human nature towards potentialities far beyond what is currently manifested. The constrained vision, in contrast, considers human nature to be laid down by biological evolution, not easily subject to change, and emphasis the role of social institutions, customs, rules, and traditions'. These contrasting visions prompt us to think about the impact of 'nature', 'nurture', and 'environment' on our visions and, thereby, on our opinions, including about government.

On the nature of knowledge, the unconstrained vision holds that a special few at any time know best what right and good for all in social policy and therefore emphasise deliberate design and planning of society in the way a business organisation may be brought about. The constrained vision, on the other hand, regards the most important knowledge for society as being dispersed throughout society, embodied in customs, traditions, institutions, and practices, and emphasises the evolutionary nature.

Caution to be exercise when we talking about the 'few' here given the times we are in where 'anti-elite' and 'anti-establishment' sentiments are in vogue. This recent and current phenomenon of individuals who have been able to gain office and power by mobilising people to support them on pretexts and guises of being anti-elite and anti-establishment, despite they obviously being members of social elites and of the 'establishment', like Trump and Johnson, is a different matter from the visions – ideas of how the world works - we are concerned with here.

Believers of the unconstrained vision approach to social processes is to seek the special causes of war, poverty, justice, inequality, crime and so on and emphasise the intentions which guide policies for social progress. Proponents of the constrained vision seek the special causes of peace, wealth, lawfulness, and so on and emphasise the institutional or system characteristics regarded as necessary for social progress. Consequently, the two visions also differed on their conception of 'social progress'.

We have enough here for our immediate purposes to give us a sense of how we can think with the concept of 'vision' as the source of opinions which constitute the climate of opinion about government.



We can now think about people's visions as they relate to the question of government - as the source of opinions about government - and as it is constituted by people's assumptions about the nature of human beings, knowledge, and social processes whether or not people are aware of these assumptions.

There is more, however. The concept of 'vision' also brings us personally to the point where we now must observe ourselves about *how we think* to be able to understand how the 'opinion' of others arise and, thereby, how the 'climate of opinion' is formed. Here we start to think about ourselves and others as thinker and about our respective roles in the life of our democracy.

In other words, in wondering about how we ourselves and others reach our opinions, that is, exploring the role of visions in our living (see Postscript below), brings us to the point of thinking developmentally about ourselves which is the overall purpose of these *Exercises for Thinking Experiences*.

## Epilogue

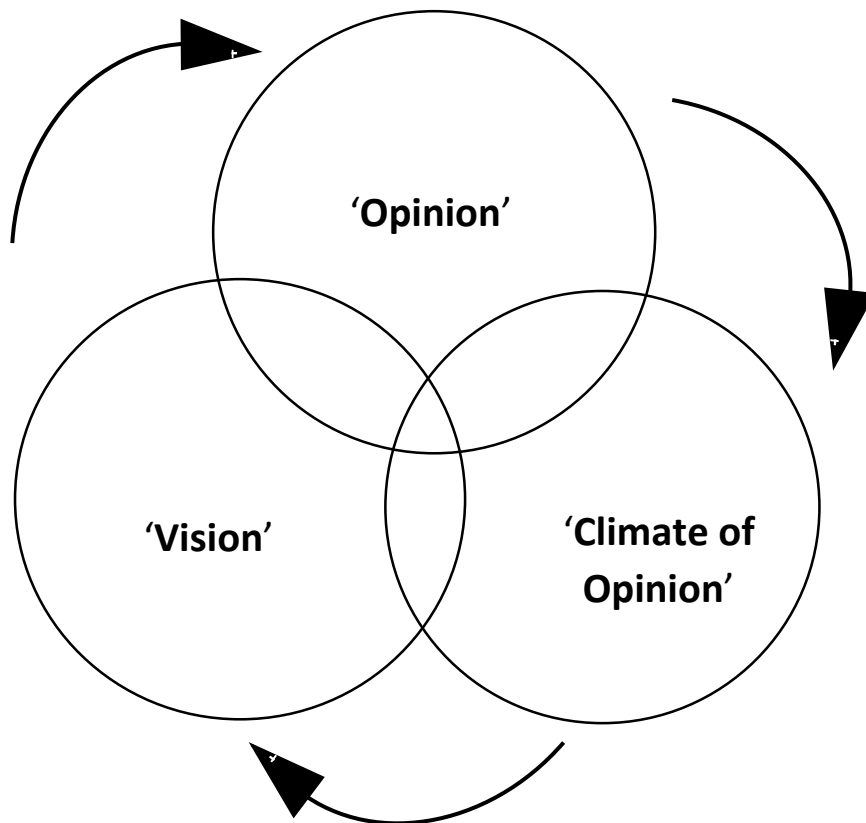
The idea of vision, as the source of opinions, completes the circle of ideas we call a **Web of Ideas** we need to generate our own thinking about the question of government.

Individually, the concepts of 'opinion', 'climate of opinion', and 'vision' can be explored further. They can be expanded out to open our thinking to reach further depths of thought. As a 'circle' of ideas which we go around, the dynamic shows us how we need to think about a complex matter in order to form a viable opinion.

We hope you will continue with us as we explore how to use a **Web of Ideas** as a tool of thought - as an aid for independent thinking.

## Web of Ideas (3)

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### Postscript

We can develop a deeper grasp of the concept of 'vision' and how to use it for developmental purposes by working with Sowell's example of the two polar concepts of the 'unconstrained vision' and the 'constrained vision' to explore *How We Think* by surfacing our visions. There are various ways to do this.

The Keynes Centre, for example, offers the [Assumptive Dive](#), as outlined [here](#), which uses the contrast between these Sowell's polar concepts to think about our visions - to surface the pre-suppositions which underlie the ways in which we see society working – and to become more aware of their influences on our thinking about issues, and how they can shape our opinions without us being aware of their doing so.

## Developmental Questions for Conversation and Reflection

We need to do hygiene work on our visions by first becoming aware of the nature and role of visions in our living, and, second, that we each operate *from*, or more accurately *as*, visions, and, third, that we surface and become aware of our particular visions and take personal responsibility for the visions we hold by asking: are these the visions I want to be? The questions posed here are only prompts for reflection for developmental purposes.

1. What does the word 'vision' alert me to about myself?
2. What awareness did I have of 'the whole push of myself' before my reading about 'vision'?
3. Am I becoming more aware of my 'visions' as I *re-* read this Essay?
4. Am I open to 'slow down time' to give myself the opportunity to dig deep into my visions?
5. What relationship do I have with my visions? Do I think and reason with them? Can I feel them? How aware am I of my emotions within my visions?
6. How motivated am I to engage with my visions? Does it matter to me to be aware of 'the silent shapers' within me?
7. What questions do I ask myself when making judgements and preparing my opinions?
8. What questions should I ask myself when preparing to make a judgement and to express my opinion?
9. What stops me paying attention to my visions, to where I operate from? What will I do about this?
10. Do I have 'company' in my life whom I can talk with, explore issues with, and listen to their experiences? Can and will this help me become more aware of my own visions?
11. Is it important for me to go beyond awareness of my current visions and to grow it into something more than what they are at present?

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<sup>i</sup> "An enterprise is congeries of people. It is not a mere congeries, since it has more solidarity than an agency', like a trade union...but it has less than a commune or a family ... An enterprise has strictly speaking no interest of its own... 'Having, as the lawyers say, neither a body to be imprisoned nor soul to be damned, the firm has no leisure to be preferred either'...It cannot even respond to

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incentives, since it has no appetite. It cannot discount the future since it has no impatience. *Everything we say about enterprises is a dangerous generalization about group behaviour.* All language to the contrary, treating the enterprise as an individual is metaphysical. Thus lawyers, in order to sue it, openly resort to legal fictions.” P.J.D. Wiles *Economic Institutions Compared*:63 (emphasis added). Halsted Press/ John Wiley, New York, 1977.

This is long known to judges, if often forgotten in practice and by legislators, who fall into the trap of legal fictions, as Wiles puts it:

“Did you expect a corporation to have a conscience, when it has no soul to be damned and no body to be kicked?” Edward Thurlow, English Jurist and Lord Chancellor, d.1806.

“A corporation cannot blush. It is a body, it is true; has certainly a head - a new one every year; arms it has and very long ones, for it can reach at anything; ... a throat to swallow the rights of the community, and a stomach to digest them! But who ever yet discovered, in the anatomy of any corporation, either bowels or a heart?” Howell Walsh, Speech, Tralee Assizes, c. 1825.

Something to think with today as we watch corporations like Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Apple and listen to occasional discussions about corporate crimes and manslaughter.

<sup>ii</sup> The ‘climate of opinion’ is an example of what is called an ‘emergent order’ in society. It is not a ‘designed order’, that is, an outcome of the intentions of any person(s). In principle, the way to start thinking with the idea of a ‘climate of opinion’ is to orient ourselves to it as a phenomenon to be thought of in terms of ‘climates’ emerging from the working out of the opinions of the myriads of persons. The ‘climate of opinion’ emerges *as the outcome of the process* that generates it, that is, from the process of opinion formation by individuals in a society. A ‘climate’ does not occur and continue independently of the process of its generation. (The concept of ‘Emergent Order’ is explained by James James Buchanan, Order Defined in the Process of its Emergence, In *The Collected Works of James M. Buchanan, Volume 1 – The Logical Foundations of Constitutional Liberty*: 244-245, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1999.) The ‘designs’ of individuals with power over others, of course, can have a large influence. People whose intentions have huge influence on the ‘climate of opinion’ today include not only heads of state with the power of the state propaganda apparatus at their disposal but also non-state actors, especially for some time in the realm of social media, such as Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Jeff Bezos of YouTube. As has been demonstrated in recent years these ‘platform’ companies hugely influence opinion manipulation by their design of search and recommendation algorithms.

<sup>iii</sup> This is a methodological position known a ‘methodological individualism’.

<sup>iv</sup> James, 1909/1996: 20-21, emphases added.

<sup>v</sup> James, 1909/1996:20, 23.

<sup>vi</sup> James, 1909/1996:20, 23.

<sup>vii</sup> Thomas Sowell. *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*. Basic Books, New York, (1987, 2002) 2007.

<sup>viii</sup> Sowell, 2002: xiii.

<sup>ix</sup> Sowell, 2007: 6. The term ‘pre-analytic cognitive act’ is Joseph A. Schumpeter, John Maynard Keynes 1883-1946, *American Economic Review* XXVI (4), September 1946, Reprinted in *Ten Great Economists: From Marx to Keynes*: 268, Oxford University Press, New York, 1965.

<sup>x</sup> Sowell, 2007: 7.

<sup>xi</sup> Sowell, 2007: 3.

<sup>xii</sup> Sowell, 2007: xii.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sowell, 2007: xiii.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sowell, 2007: 3.

<sup>xv</sup> Sowell, 2007: 14.

<sup>xvi</sup> Sowell, 2007: 6.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Sowell, 2007: 6.

<sup>xviii</sup> V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Human Nature and the Architecture of the Mind*: 100-104, Fourth Estate, London, 1998.

<sup>xix</sup> Sowell, 2007: 7-8.

<sup>xx</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money*: 383-384, Macmillan, London, 1936.

<sup>xxi</sup> Sowell, 2007: 8.

<sup>xxii</sup> Sowell, 2007: *xii*.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Sowell, 2007: *xii*.

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