

5 - USING THE WEB

We selected three ideas from the vast repertoire of ideas available to help us think about the question we posed.

How did we do this? We didn't do it by any formula or rule because there are none to do it *for* us. In other words, we must start with ourselves. Here, also we note that getting started is not about having lots of information as such (although having some information *can and may* be useful). Rather it is about *how we think* – it is about 'our preference as to our best working attitude', to use William James's way of expressing our 'vision' of ourselves.

Indeed, to be clear, it is first and foremost *that we think* - that we **stop and think**. And that may require that we break ingrained habits such as rushing to hold with certainty some answer to the question, *i.e.*, an opinion. We could usefully practice saying 'I don't know' as [here](#). It may also require that we resist any tendencies to 'illusions of explanatory depth' [here](#) and restrain in ourselves any need for having – or fear of not having - all the answers.

In other words, we open ourselves to *asking questions of ourselves* and, thereby, to *thinking for ourselves*, albeit using the help of tools of thought, but doing so consciously and under our control.

A Web of Ideas

We now bring together the three ideas into a **Web of Ideas** and explore how we can use a 'web' as a stimulus for thinking, as a way of exercising our faculty of thinking, and as a tool to help think through a question for the purpose of coming to a viewpoint about the issue in question.

Recall, while we may be interested in the question of the 'collapse of democracy' in recent years as citizens, our primary focus in *Exercises for Thinking Experiences* is attending to *how we think* and, through these exercises, working on growing our minds. This is based on the principle that 'thinking' – distinguished from logical and similar operations commonly regarded as 'thinking' – cannot be taught or learned.

'Thinking' must be practised, that is, *experienced* to raise the awareness which may lead to the kind of *insights* which are personally developmental.

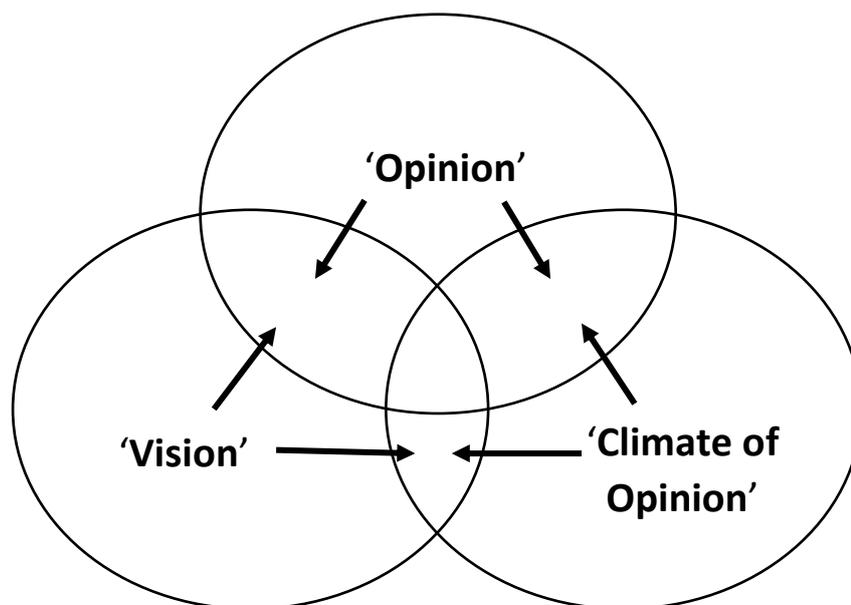
Again, there is no formula or rule for using the web as a visual aid for thinking. Thus, what is suggested here is only that, a suggestion for getting going. As a web we can begin anywhere.

This is an attractive feature of the web as an aid for ordering our thoughts about different aspects of an issue, some of them starting at one element in the web and some at another and working our way around the web.

Thus, we can begin by exploring individually each element of the web, that is, by exploring separately each of the selected ideas summarily displayed in the web we have decided upon for the moment. We are thinking about issues each idea raises for consideration and reflection while observing our openness, or otherwise, to thoughts *surfacing* in us.

We can then explore the bilateral interactions among the three ideas by considering connections between each set of pairs as illustrated in Figure 1. This consideration has the form of questioning activity – we are open to questions *arising naturally* and we search for questions to ask about the relationship between each pair of ideas.

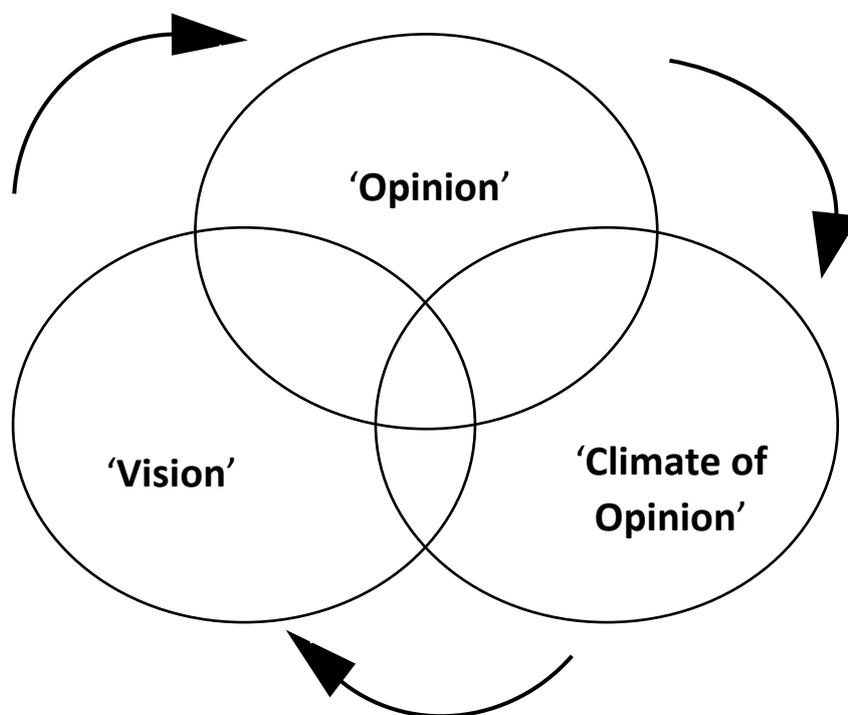
Web of Ideas (1)



In these two practices we get a deeper grasp, individually and in paired combinations, of the ideas we are using for our instrument of thought. We are making them into an *apparatus of our mind*, and not just words on a page, for us to use consciously for thinking about the problem.

We can then work with the *interplay between* the three ideas by circling around web, as illustrated in Figure 2. This is how the simple visual device of the web as a way of laying out a set of ideas can play a useful role in stimulating thoughts in us. The key to effective use lies within us, not on the page with a picture, by being open to thoughts coming to us as our thinking activity is stimulated by looking at the Web and physically moving our eyes around it, that is, in effect, *moving our mind* around the ideas.

Web of Ideas (2)



As we go around the circle of ideas, 'playing around' the Web, we are, in effect, blending the ideas into one 'sense' or 'feel' inside us. As we go back and forth with them this blending becomes the 'mental lens' through which we come to look at the world in relation to the issue of interest. That *feeling* or sense is visualised by the intersection of the three circles in the illustration of the Web of Ideas. It is through this sense or feel of a union of the three ideas that we see the world in relation to the issue of interest.

The Effect of Using a Web of Ideas

As we delve into each idea, then the bilateral interactions between them, and then circle around the whole web of ideas we freshen our sources of opinions, the freshness of conception as Jamesⁱ put it, and thereby increase awareness of our sources of opinions.

“Above all, keep your colours fresh.”

Edouard Manet

Playing with the Web of Ideas in this way brings a mental flexibility that is a counter to John Maynard Keynes’s difficulty about thinking with ideas that ‘the difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones.’ⁱⁱ

We will, moreover, find ourselves during this iterative process surfacing our thoughts about the matter at hand. We can then weigh these ‘thought-objects’ for their value to us in reaching a conclusion, judgment, and opinion.

“And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.”

Attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche

Matters such as these are our primary concerns here as we are looking at how we can think about some issue. Thus, our interest in the *Exercises for Thinking Experiences* is not with *what we think* about the current ‘demise of democracy’ or with the overall role of the ‘climate of opinion’. Rather, our interest is with *how we think* about the matter.

In other words, we wish to attend to ourselves as regards *how we think* to understand better this aspect of ourselves. The Web of Ideas can be used as a way of attending to ourselves to raise our awareness of *how we think with ideas* and *how we hold opinions*.

Attending to ourselves in this way will raise questions which, in themselves, will inform us about our ‘preference as to our best working attitude’. Such questioning can bring the kind of movement that is personal development, that is, the movement to an ‘enlarged mentality’.

There is a problem, however, which was put by James, adjusting for the phrasing of his time, as follows:

“[Ordinary people] find themselves inheriting their beliefs, they know not how. They jump into them with both feet, and they stand there.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“Few people are capable of expressing with equanimity opinions that differ from the prejudices of their social environment. Most people are even incapable of forming such opinions.”

Albert Einstein

The question we can ask of ourselves is: *do we just stand there?*

The issue about *standing there* was well put in the question attributed to Keynes:

“When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

The facts of the world in which we live change. What do we do when the facts change?

We recall, the point made by Barden, about being born into a ‘tradition of thought’ – a ‘climate of opinion’ - and that this tradition is “where we are fated to begin ... since our tradition is not only where but, more profoundly, *what we are*”.

While that may be so as regards the ‘climate of opinion’, that it is both our starting point and what we are at that point, nevertheless, as Barden pointed out, where we end is our individual and personal responsibility.^{iv} The obstacle to movement is that, since we are our tradition, to question our tradition – the ‘climate of opinion’ from which we operate - is to question ourselves. ^v

“When a man is born, the stage is set for him.”

Erich Fromm

Questioning ourselves is not easy. The Web of Ideas can help us engage with ourselves in a developmental way.

This aspect of using the Web of Ideas has an important implication for *how we think* and to intentionally and deliberately grow our minds.

Because the ‘climate of opinion’ changes, the ‘modern mind’ is limited to describing earlier climates of opinion as best we can since we cannot live in them - *we are inside our ‘climate of opinion’*. The requirement of ‘thinking with an enlarged mentality’, Hannah Arendt put it, demands that we ‘train our imagination to go visiting’.^{vi}

"There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?' "

David Foster Wallace

The Web of Ideas and its visual representation helps our mind go visiting to other ideas.

Another Effect of Using a Web of Ideas

Thinking is a bit of a mystery for some people. This mystery is despite thinking being a natural activity which we all do *without thinking*, so to speak.

One reason for the mystery is that thinking is an invisible, and therefore unobservable, activity without any outcome to be seen from the activity itself. We are not inclined, therefore, to attend to our experiencing of the phenomenon that is thinking.

Another reason that thinking is often not noticed is because it is so natural an activity that it does not merit attention unless we deliberately direct attention to our experience of thinking or we feel something is 'wrong' within us about our thinking.

We notice 'thought-objects' expressed as verbal or written statements in the form of books, poems, letters, tweets, emails and so on. These are not thinking itself. They are the outcome of interpretive interventions of the recollections by which we convert our thinking into these visible 'thought-objects'.

One barrier to our awareness of thinking itself, as distinct from thought-objects, is a common misunderstanding about thinking. Many people associate thinking activity with logical and deductive operations, with rule and formula following of the kind of activity practised in geometry classes in school, and with the notion of there being right and wrong answers to questions. Therefore, unless we are doing such activities, we are not inclined to regard *what we are* doing as thinking. We even may be derogatory about it, calling thinking itself by such labels as 'day-dreaming', and 'absent-mindedness', and regarding it as 'impractical', 'useless' and a 'waste of time'.

One of the effects of using a Web of Ideas as a visual aid is to assist in becoming aware *that we are thinking* and that thinking involves what is too often regarded as the mental equivalent of doodling, although, when we are doodling, we may actually be thinking. As we are using the Web of Ideas as a tool of thought we may catch a glimpse of ourselves thinking, a moment without recollection and interpretation intervening with the effect that we go on with a thought-object, that is, the outcome of converting our recollection or reconstruction of our thinking into a thought-object.

To catch ourselves thinking we must *listen* to our selves, to our whole selves, to what is going on inside of us. In a limited, but useful, way a Web of Ideas helps us *listen* to ourselves.

What Can One Person Do?

The requirement of 'training our imagination to go visiting' also demands that we care and judge, including in relation to ourselves, that we do not become indifferent to ourselves as well as others. This seems to be a tall order in today's world of politics and the 'crisis in democracy'. Our response to this demand is enlightening of ourselves.

Any 'climate of opinion' is made up of a mind-boggling diversity of people. Running across this diversity can be the feeling that whatever an individual does has little or no affect. Indeed, it may be the case (although far from always) that the effect of a person acting alone appears to be very little, if noticeable at all. That misses the point and that point has implications for us.

The idea that the sum of negligible effects need not be negligible in the aggregate is demonstrated very often today through the power of social media.^{vii} The effects of all, or many, people can combine into a significant effect: small effects when interacting can amount to large effects. As one writer put it, "the sum of small effects need not be negligible".^{viii}

Thus, even if we may individually feel that the impact of our opinion is minor, unimportant, and irrelevant, that cannot hold for all of us because all of us are the 'climate of opinion'. While we are each only one person, nevertheless, we each are a member of society and contributor to the aggregation that we call 'climate of opinion'. A 'climate of opinion' is the outcome of people together.

The sense of this power was beautifully conveyed by Senator Robert Kennedy in his great 'Ripple of Hope' speech of 1966 at the University of Cape Town during the depths of apartheid:

"Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Hence, although we may feel at times that our individual development may count for little, and the effort may not be worth it, this may not be the case as it may affect others, doing so in ways and at times *unknown to ourselves*, and so on among people. Furthermore, even if an individual's

development seems insignificant, the combining of the 'enlarged mentalities' of many people can give rise to a large impact.

Therefore, how we approach the matter of *how we think* in adulthood is fundamental to the quality of our 'climates of opinion' and, thereby, our lives and our society. Every time an individual undertakes intentional and deliberate development of *how to think* in their adulthood the movement to an 'enlarged mentality' can also become a difference that makes a difference to many others.^{ix}

The issue for each of us, however, is that, as Sowell said: "We will do almost anything for our visions, except think about them." But think about them we must. We must *stop and think* - think what we are doing - as Arendt expressed the demand as, otherwise we are open to 'thoughtlessness' - the inability to see things from the standpoint of others and, thereby, as a result to make poor judgements which in the extreme may leave us open to being cruel or worse and, in the words of Arendt, to the 'banality of evil'.^x

Developmental Questions for Conversation and Reflection

This week we move to a higher developmental plane, hence this prelude to the prompt questions.

We start with the observation that many of us go through our lives seemingly making lots of mistakes. Why is this? One reason is that we ignore the importance of 'the questioning activity' in our lives - we do not ask ourselves 'the hard questions' - and so miss the value of questioning for personal development.

The habit of proper developmental questioning is hard to develop and maintain and even harder when directed to ourselves. Questioning ourselves is about awareness and not about being judgmental or negative about ourselves or engaging in self-recrimination. The 'questioning activity' is a positive energy in our lives.

We may be tempted to think that getting to know ourselves and building our 'real selves' is simple and obvious. But that is a mistaken assumption many people hold even those who might think about it, which it would seem many do not.

We also make an error when we think that we are the only one with thoughts and feelings - everyone in our life is also creating their reality through their own unobservable thoughts and feelings.

No one can access our internal experience of anything but ourselves: I can only find out about another by asking what is happening for them and then

allow that what they say will be their interpretations of what is going on inside of them.

In this way someone can be our 'critical and trusted friend' who, by asking us *developmental* type questions – the *challenge* – and helping us *listen to our answers* provide the necessary *support* for intentional and deliberate development. The key conditions are our openness to such dialogues and the right balance of support and challenge.

Development occurs in two ways: first, it *happens to us* as, for example, is the case when we are children or it may happen through crisis and trauma; second, we can undertake our development intentionally and deliberately. The latter is preferable but difficult on one's own and requires someone or some group, such as [here](#), to be one's 'trusted critical friend'.

Our 'trusted critical friend', by asking questions such as those below on the basis of our engaging in these *Exercises for Thinking Experiences*, including our reading and re-reading of the three core Ideas Essays, that is, by helping us explore our thinking, opens our way to development. The 'trusted critical friend' helps us to create the challenging and supportive 'space' for the kind of movement that is developmental.

Questions

How are you feeling about yourself?

What are you thinking?

What excites you?

What are you hoping for in using the Web of Ideas?

What triggered you in the three essays?

What core values are apparent to you from observing your own reaction?

Do you practice asking others in your life what they are feeling and thinking in response to what is going on in their lives?

Do you have 'good conversations' with people?

How would you describe the kind of people with whom you have 'good conversations'?

What are the features of those conversations which make them 'good' for you?

Are conversations with you 'good' for others?

ⁱ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*: 16, (1909) University of Nevada Press, Lincoln, NV, 1996.

ⁱⁱ John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*: viii, Macmillan, London, 1936.

ⁱⁱⁱ James, 1909/1996: 13.

^{iv} Garrett Barden, 1990: viii and 51; also 33, 37, 69, 126; emphasis added.

^v Barden, 1990:111; also 69.

^{vi} Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*: 43, Edited by Ronald Beiner, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

^{vii} One has only to recall #MeToo and 'Black Lives Matter' among the many social 'movements' arising from the aggregation of individual actions.

^{viii} Russ Roberts, *How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life*: 179, Portfolio/Penguin, New York, 2014. Roberts is referring (without page reference) to the idea that the sum of negligible effects need not be negligible in the aggregate in Milton Friedman, *Price Theory*: 95ff, Aldine, Chicago, 1976.

^{ix} We could go deeper by exploring the 'strategic' and 'tactical' relationships between individual action and the aggregate outcome for social change of the type of interest here. In essence, it is a case where, as Thomas Schelling discusses in *Micromotives and Macrobehaviour* (Norton, New York, 1978: 14, 19, 24.), people are influencing and responding to each other's behaviours – they are adapting to *their* environment which consists of other people responding to their environment. This type of situation is not one where aggregation is a simple summation of individual level behaviours. It involves a "system of interaction between individuals and other individuals or between individuals and the collectivity". The twist in our matter is that individuals in adapting to their social environment would also be consciously creating their social environment for themselves. It would be an activity "in which people's behaviour is influenced by the behaviour of others, or people care about the behaviour of others, or they both care and are influenced".

^x Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*: 48-49, 287-288, Revised and Enlarged Edition, Penguin Books, New York, 1994.

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