THE 'WEB OF IDEAS' AS A TOOL OF THOUGHT

This Essay introduces the construction and use of the '**Web of Ideas'** for working with our 6 thinkers and using their ideas as an illustrative example.

The '**Web of Ideas'** is a useful tool for *thinking with* other minds (authors/books) and, especially, for *re-viewing* purposes because it is based on the principle of identifying **key words**.

With this tool we can surface what we consider to be each author's **key ideas**, that is their ideas which we consider have implications for *How We Think*. It is a way of creating our own tool-bag of ideas for working with.

We can populate the **Web of Ideas** with our ideas and, in effect, as we construct many Webs as our thinking continues to evolve. We are searching for the best set of ideas we can take from the authors as we put each author's ideas in conversation with the ideas of other thinkers.

Both re-viewing and 'webbing' are important for our own thinking and how we relate to others through ideas, including concepts and theories, in our context of thinking with the authors and their ideas. Making good use of the **Web of Ideas** means being *really* in *dialogue with the authors*. This ensures that we are not passive recipients of the thoughts of others. That is, it helps prevent us from being the 'thought followers' of a social media world where self-proclaimed, so-called 'thought leaders' imply that others – *WE* - should be their followers.

Prelude

The **Web of Ideas** is a tool to help us form and use 'lenses' through which we look into the world – it is a tool for *thinking with* – and we can use it for thinking about ourselves, thinking about our thinking.

Thinking is not something that can be taught or learned; it can only, *and must*, be practised. When there is the need to think, the practice needs to have been done. That raises the question: when do I practise my thinking? When do I attend to my thinking? How often do I practice playing the piano, cooking, welding, typing, or footballing? But what about practicing my

thinking? Unfortunately, we mostly take for granted that we can do our own thinking without practice.

Also, we tend to confuse 'thinking', for example, with the use of *logical or calculating operations* such as they *were taught and learned* in geometry class or with the practice of recalling what has been committed to memory in school. As a result, we also tend to set aside the practicing of thinking and let opportunities for practice pass. But, when we need to be *able to think*, it is too late to practice and we find ourselves unable or unwilling to think.

Since, 'thinking' has to be practiced, the practicing must be done by ourselves because obviously no one else can do our practice for us as that would amount to thinking for us.

Thinking with ideas is not just about reading about them and leaving them on a page. We have to *work with* them. We have to use them as our own tool of thought for some time even if, later on, we move on from them. Only by spending time with them do we bring the 'rhythm of ideas' into our mind.

In this way we make ideas part of the 'apparatus of our mind' - a tool for thinking *with*, to help us make our own judgments and reach our own conclusions about the complex matters we face – rather than just something we 'look at' and leave there on a page with no benefit for *how we think*.

The **Web of Ideas** is a means by which we form our apparatus of mind.

Constructing a 'Web of Ideas'

The key to effectively using the Web of Ideas as a tool of thought - for the purpose of forming a 'lens' - is to start our thinking by focussing on a particular concrete problem.

We have to find a starting point for our thinking with a Web of Ideas if one is not already given to us from some external purpose.

That is, we need somehow to formulate a question to which we will seek an answer through working with ideas and which itself will guide us towards ideas we can use for thinking with. Focusing on a specific question surfaces and draws together the ideas we have in us so that we can use them in combination to think through the issue.

We start with ourselves and we note that getting started is not about having lots of information as such, although having some information *can and may* be useful at times, and we have enough with our six authors. 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.

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 grow our minds intentionally and deliberately.

The **Web of Ideas** and its visual representation helps our mind go visiting to other ideas and, in our case here, to become more aware of *how* we currently think. There is a printable version of it [here]().

Using the 'Web of Ideas'

We can surface and bring together three ideas which are *selected only for convenience and illustrative purposes* into a simple **Web of Ideas**. These ideas are not picked out for any definitive purpose and should be replaced by one's own.

We select these only so we can then 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, our primary focus is attending to *how we think* and, through these exercises, working on growing our minds. This is based on the principle that 'thinking' cannot be taught or learned:

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

There is no formula or rule for using the **Web of Ideas** as a visual mental aid for thinking. Thus, what is suggested here is only that, a suggestion for getting going. We can begin anywhere with a web.

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, that is, *thinking*.

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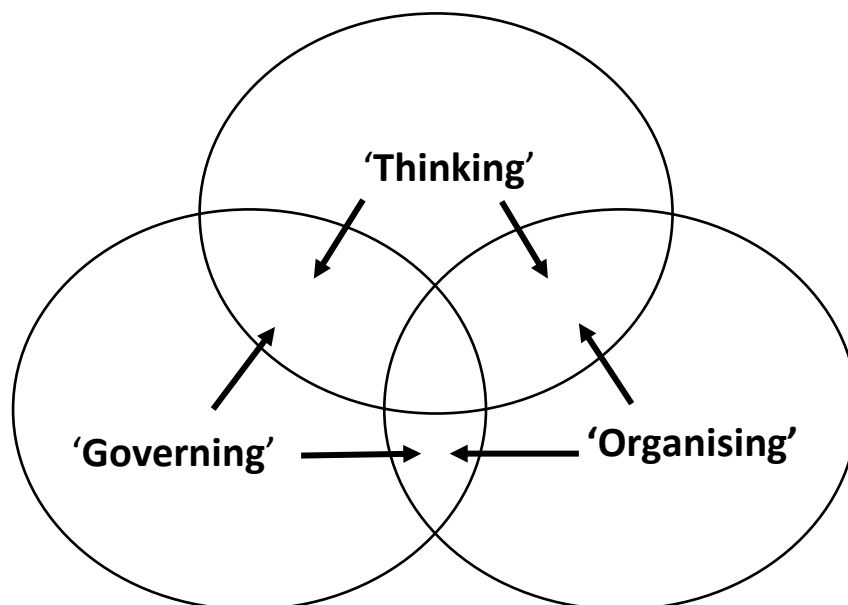
In these two practices we get a deeper grasp, individually and in paired combinations, of the ideas we are using for our instrument of thought. We are making them into an *apparatus of our mind*, and not just words on a page, for us to use consciously for thinking about the problem.

We can then work with the *interplay between* the three ideas by circling around the 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)
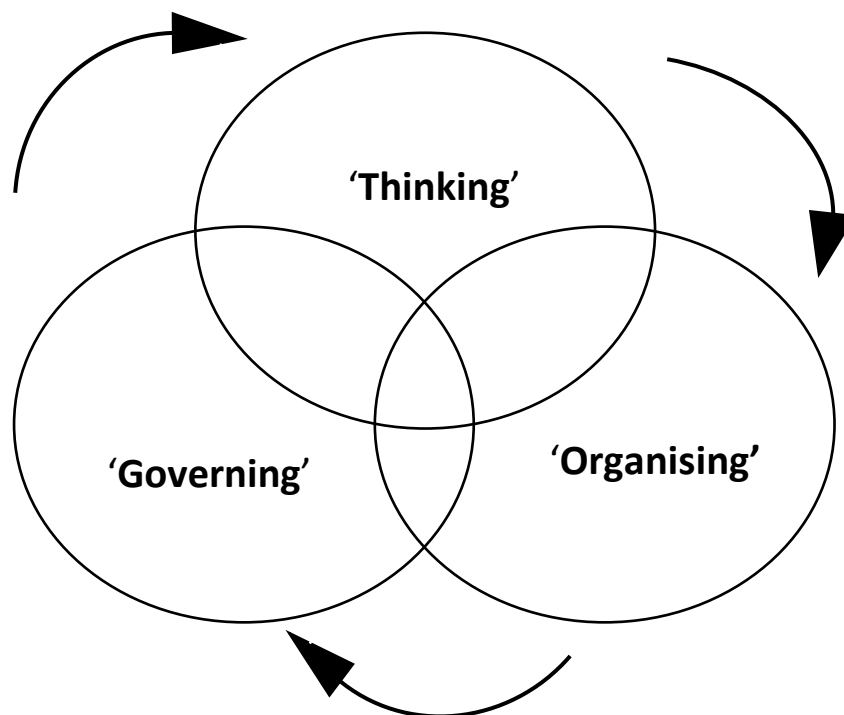
As we go around the circle of ideas, 'playing around' the Web, we are, in effect, blending the ideas into one 'sense' or 'feel' inside us. As we go back and forth with them this blending becomes the 'mental lens' through which we come to look at the world in relation to the issue of interest. That *feeling* 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.

An Effect of Using the 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

thinking, the freshness of conception as James put it [i], and thereby increase awareness of our sources of opinions.

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] Working around the web helps us escape from the hold of set ideas and ways of thinking.

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.

Matters such as these are our primary concerns here as we are looking at how we can think about some issue, our interest here is with *how we think*.

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'.

Another Effect of Using the 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 physically 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 the silent dialogue within ourselves.

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[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.