



## Thinking, Time, and Identity

How nonlinearity can help you understand your mind, your thoughts, and your future.

*“Intelligence is something we are born with. Thinking is a skill that must be learned.”*  
— Edward de Bono

*“Being able to ‘think out of the box’ presupposes you were able to think in it.”*  
— Bob Lutz, Vice President and Vice Chairman of Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler.

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## Linear Thinking

Many things come naturally to us, but thinking is not one of them. Many things are taught to us, thinking is not one of them. Some forms of thinking are taught, such as logic, but there are many forms. We learn primarily two, linear and emotional thinking, and we learn these by mirroring the behavior of others.

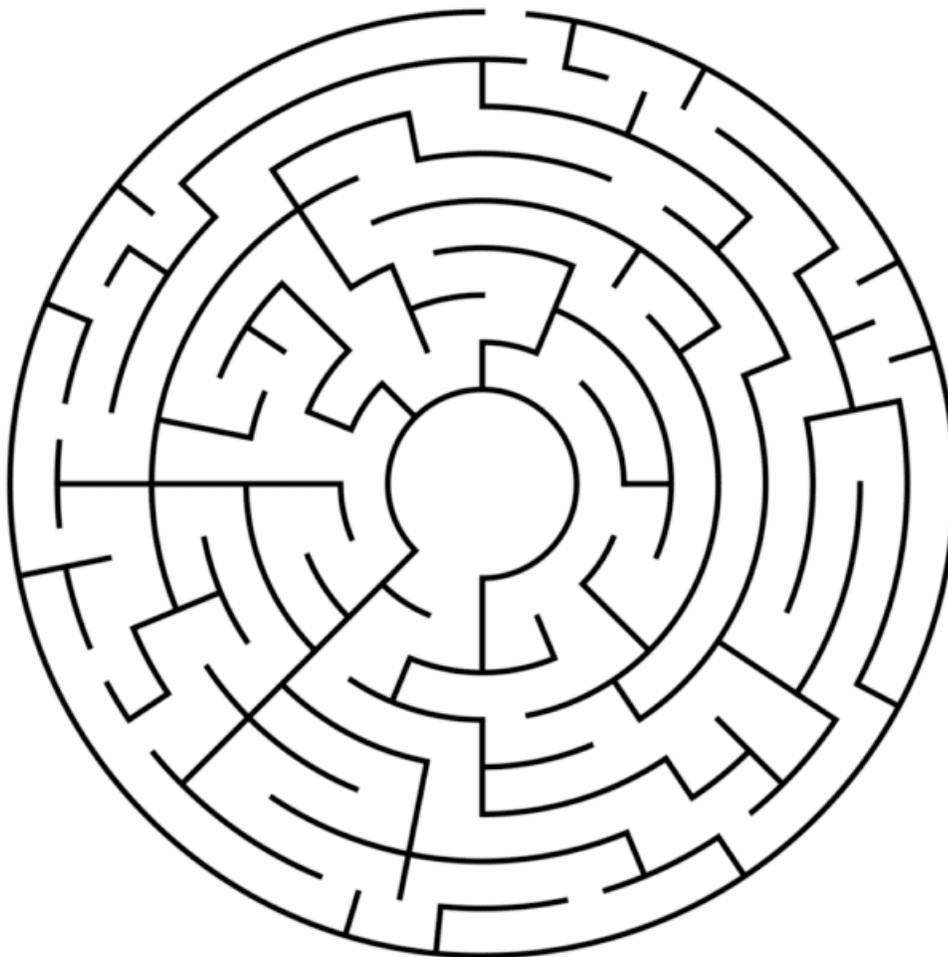
Linear thinking is sequential and causal and it forms a template for our perception. We learn to see in terms

of sequence and we learn to think in terms of causes. Our constantly rationalizing minds attach the notions of sequence and cause to all we see in the world, and if we don't see it, and in fact most of the time we don't see it, we make it up. We make it up to such an extent that not only won't we see what doesn't fit this model, but we can't. As a result, our sense of self is limited to our perception of time and thought, which are mental constructions.

Nothing exists as we measure it. Measurements are just the imprint of something that cannot be reduced to a measurement. We measure the imprint, not the thing.

Time does not exist as we measure it. To us, time is a sequence of events scarcely measured, fleetingly recalled, and not understood. That's enough to get by as long as things remain ordered. The problem is that we think that is all there is and, as with any habit, that becomes all we perceive and imagine. With effort, you can perceive and imagine more. If you cannot, then you will not understand most of the workings of the world, which are not linear.

Linear thinking proceeds in steps and just as in walking, these steps only touch the ground at isolated points. These are the points of experience, and between them there is only the assumption of continuity. When "A causes B" we're asked to accept the reality of A and B, and to take on faith the notion of cause. In physics, cause is based on an abstract notion of invariance, but just about everywhere else cause is metaphysical. Linear thinking is a metaphysical chain of perceptions.



## **Circular Thinking**

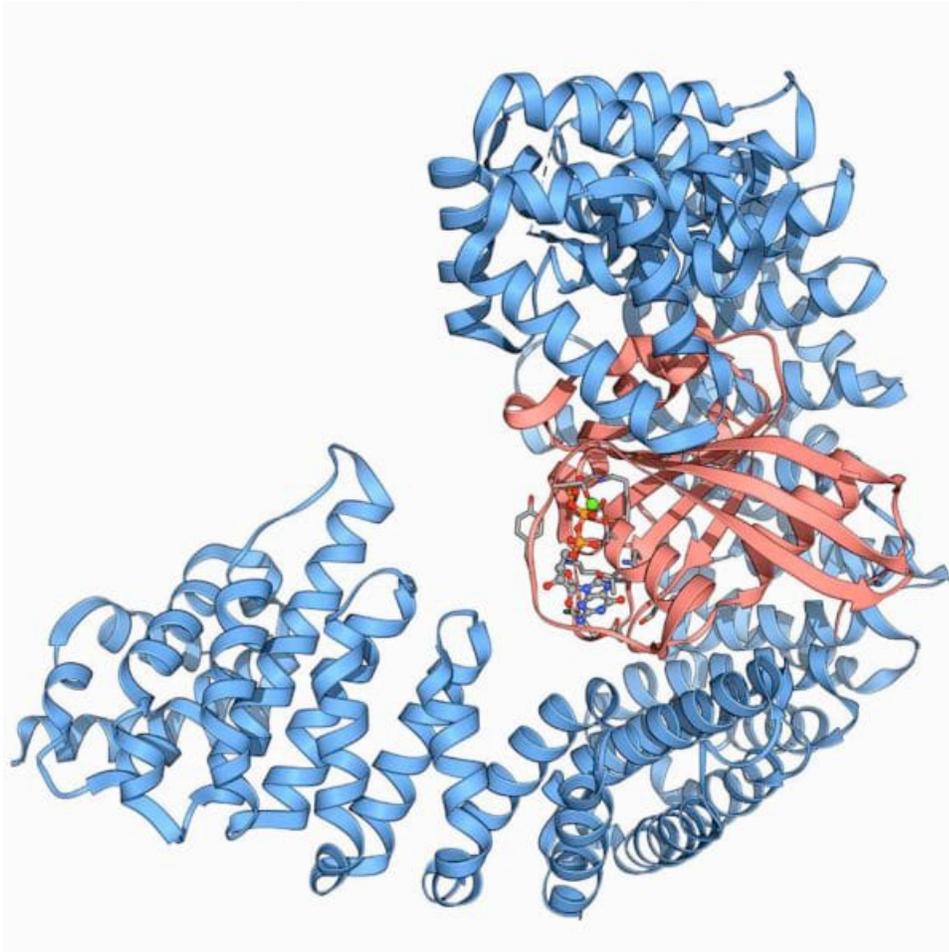
Circular thinking is a flawed approach to nonlinear thinking to which many people are drawn. Circular thinking attempts to solve a problem by connecting dots that follow a linear and circular path. Because the

path returns to the starting point in a way that is not obvious, the argument appears logical, consistent, and substantive. And it is all of these things, but it's also wrong because, like all tautologies, the "argument" is false substantiation for a restatement of the premise.

We are asked to accept that point to which the circular thinking brings us as embodying a greater understanding, a new insight. Circular thinking is alive and well in the higher realms of argument, rhetoric, and discourse as well as the lower realms of gossip, hearsay, and spectacle. Circular thinking is a form of sophistry in which the assumptions are crafted to justify the conclusion. Most of what we hear in politics and conversation is circular thinking.

I was privileged to recently meet an intelligent person who believes the earth is flat. I much appreciate his showing me some of the evidence for this, which consists mostly of puzzling photographs and conundrums. This was wonderful stuff for the breadth and scope of the ideas it encompassed. The arguments were careful and logical and I could not find the errors in many of them, though I could in some. Regardless, they were wonderful examples of clear, reasoned, linear thinking carefully assembled to justify their assumptions.

At the same time, the arguments were frightening for their blindness. They lacked far more than they contained, and in this they are a brilliant example of thought being used to represent a feeling. To disguise that feeling as something reasonable when, in fact, it is entirely emotional. The feeling I discern in the arguments supporting the flat earth is fear. Fear of social control, political exploitation, and organized deception. And these are all valid fears, but I don't think circular thinking addresses them. Circular thinking generates powerlessness and, from that, paranoia. It lacks understanding.



## **Nonlinear Thinking**

Nonlinear thinking departs from being sequential in time and causation or, to put it another way, nonlinear thinking allows you to see the multiplicity of the world. Structures emerge from the multiplicity of the world

and the greater the multiplicity you can see—which is to say the connections between many things—the greater the structures you will comprehend or start to comprehend. And by “greater” I mean larger in scope, size, time, duration, or effect. A galaxy is a large structure, but so is chromosome.

The ignorance of most specialists follows from the limits of their thinking, the boundaries constraining their thinking to a circumscribed domain. We are all guilty of this ourselves because we need to quickly predict sequential events, and nonlinear thinking does not support this.

Understanding is not the same as performing or reacting, though our understanding is often tested by performances that are basically predictive. Nonlinear thinking does not generate rapid predictions. But whatever it does is more valid than what results from linear thinking. Sending a rocket to the moon requires linear thinking. Understanding climate change requires nonlinear thinking.

To think nonlinearly requires giving up the title of being an expert. I know many smart people who cannot think nonlinearly for the very personal reason that their sense of self is attached to their authority. To think nonlinearly you must admit your ignorance. Only the most able people do this.

The paradox is that by doing this you become smart but, even so, few people can. For most people, control is more important than understanding. The first step to becoming smarter, in this sense, is recognizing your attachment to authority.



## **Emotional Thinking**

I am working to better understand emotion. It’s a hot topic. I have some useful things to say, but I cannot yet distill them. I will only say that I feel emotion, as a general thing, is a form of collective intelligence. That is,

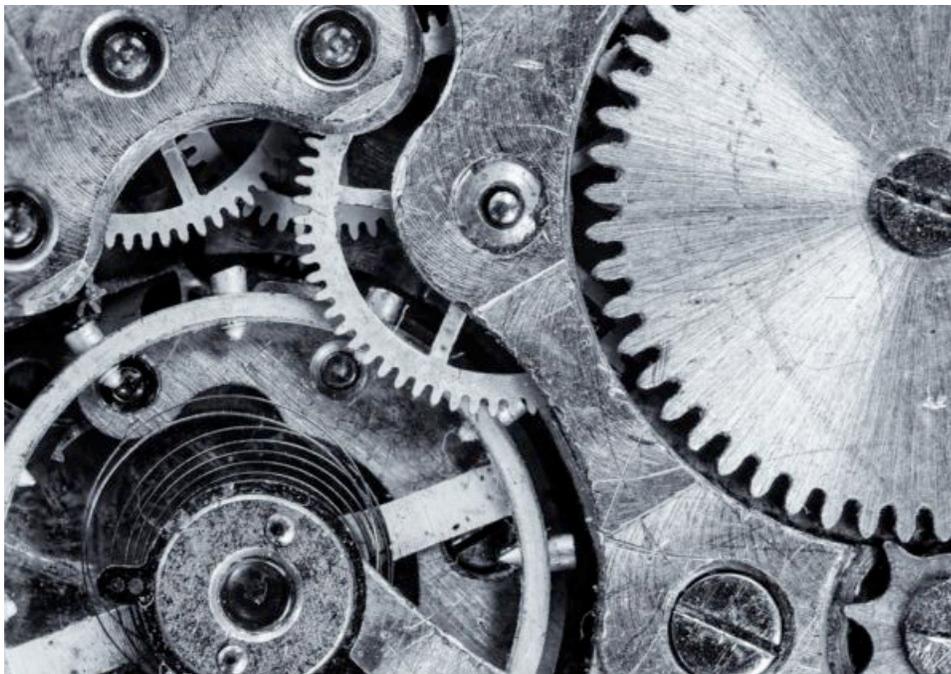
emotion embodies whole blocks of experience. Different emotions embody different kinds of experience.

Emotion does not lend itself to thinking, as we know the term. It is closer to a form of interpreted perception. We experience emotion, we don't construct it. Emotion informs us, we don't assemble it. In this, emotion, or the totality of our emotions, provides direction for us. People who are emotionally disturbed, dis-regulated, or dysfunctional are fundamentally impaired in their sense of direction or, as I prefer to say, in they cannot understand truth.

We don't learn to think emotionally but rather think using emotional perception. The processes and conclusions of this kind of thinking, which I'm calling emotional thinking, are different from reasoned thinking, but it is still the same "us" that does it. We feel ourselves into existence more than we think ourselves into existence.

To some extent, we learn to think emotionally but to a larger extent we are born with the ability to perceive emotionally. What we learn is how to assemble, apply, and react using emotions. Some of us are much better than others at this. There is a wide spectrum of emotions and a wide spectrum of skills.

I believe emotional thinking is a key to thinking nonlinearly because emotional thinking is neither logical or sequential. It is reasonable in it's own way, and those emotional reasons enable us to use emotions as a foundation for how we feel about the world. Unfortunately, there is little agreement on or training in emotional reasoning. This is the focus of my work.



## **Time-threaded**

The perception of sequential time is a cognitive trap. The apparency of time proceeding from past to future between the smallest events we can discern does not mean that it proceeds along the same "front," at the same pace, or in the same small steps over larger spans of time or distances across space. The nonlinearity of things, the chaos and unpredictability between the points of our perception, means that we don't really know how things proceed.

The environment in which things occur, be that ecological, atomic, social, or astronomical, is shaped by things that happen slowly, quickly, near, and far. A layering of different things, sporadically connected, support or create other structures which themselves emerge, interact, and disappear only to have an effect at

distant times and places. We try to make sense of this, but there are forces we cannot make sense of because, like asteroids, they appear so rarely or not at all. Yet, when they do appear they can change everything.

It is not that time is a fiction—though it might be—it's that our sense of all things being well ordered, recognized, and recorded at every instant is a fiction. There is much in our universe that simply does not exist now as we know it, did not exist in the past, and will not exist as we presume in the future. These “things,” or events out of which we assemble our time-ordered reality, are metaphysical. They are concepts grounded in indirect observations and erroneous theories. To be clear: all observations are indirect, and all theories are erroneous.



## Identity

None of this would be a problem were it not for our habit of building our behavior based on predictions of the future. If we were less cerebral we would simply form habitual patterns that did not extrapolate into the future. We might call these “zero order theories” in that they predict no change in any pattern: the days repeat, as do the seasons, and other phenomena. But we don't do this. Instead, we predict change based on our thinking, and we position ourselves for it. Rather than waiting for consequences we endeavor to make them.

We ask if animals think and feel. I assume they do, and that is generally agreed. I wonder, instead, who they think they are? I don't mean whether they think they are, as I assume they do, but who?

We, as humans, are what we create ourselves to be. We have an identity, and that seems partly to be our ego, or ego based. I asked this question a few weeks ago, in a somewhat different manner, and was told, “But you have a soul!” I said, “Thank you!” But was not really the question.

I was not asking whether I could conceive myself as something, but what that “thing” amounted to. To say, “It is your soul” is flat-earth thinking. It is circular and, in a real sense, it is linear. It's certainly metaphysical, which also misses the point. The question is: of all the nonlinear things in the universe that am I made up of, how much of them do I appreciate?

I believe this is a valid question, but I also believe it does not admit an answer in the system from which it's asked. There are other ways of thinking that are more expansive and inclusive than linear thinking. Ways that

do not presuppose that time scans existence like a moving spotlight. Ways that are not based on perception and prediction. Maybe we can't know them, but that's our problem.



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