

## Degrees of non-separation

In the usual “degrees of separation” game, the degrees are measured by the shortest number of people one must go through to make a connection between person A & B (1 degree)—or through B to C (2 degrees), C to D (3 degrees), etc. The original ground zero of the game was Kevin Bacon, and connections made with other actors via shared movie casts.

Later experiments using letters transferred only between persons who know each other seem to suggest that most people can be connected with 6 degrees of separation or less, where degrees of separation actually represent levels of connect-ability. You give me as the ultimate recipient someone in a remote village in India, for example. I send it to an old friend who lives elsewhere in India, who passes it on to someone he knows who knows someone in a town much closer, who knows someone in that village, who knows the designated recipient (5 degrees).

There are other ways to play as well, including ones that allow for other forms of “mediation.” Take a live event, whether a presidential debate or a performance of some sort<sup>6</sup>, for example. Let’s say 0 degrees separation is being in the presentation, a participant. The live audience would represent one degree of separation, then, whereas a viewer watching via a screen somewhere else at the same time would be at two degrees.

You can make your own rules & standards for things like distance added for an on-screen viewer watching at a later time (perhaps even years), as well as for degrees added when a news program after the event plays a few short excerpts of “selected highlights,” offering its summary view, &/or *review* of the performances. A newspaper summary, whether by reporter or columnist with overt opinions, but without more than a few quotes & still photos from the event itself, may represent a different kind of distance (potentially closer or further away from the TV coverage).

Ironically, the historian uses the greater distance as a way of actually getting closer to the core event, using primary & secondary sources to look *through* to what is (or seems to that investigator) most meaningful, at least partly by seeing it in its fuller context, including subsequent events. The degrees of actual separation, like the distance time makes, can't be easily objectified. There can be a vast difference in the meaning of the numerical degrees between one kind of performance & another, for example. Some events might even provide clearer view from home, as in a debate; some have an energy you have to be there to experience.

Whether the instruments of transmission are individuals or media teams, their particular characteristics make an often significant difference. Not all individuals respond, interpret, and express equally, or with the same kind of lens. We discriminate between the blowhard, the manipulator, the spinmeister, and the honest thinker you've come to trust. No two news teams or art critics will have quite the same take, perhaps.

The situation is quite like that in the translation of literature. Things like how much of the original spirit comes through & how much the new version represents the spirit or mind-set of the translator vary.

Sometimes, perhaps, there's hardly difference. But other times, as when scholars steeped in neoclassical forms of English literature tried their hand at Basho, the differences can be profound, embedding degrees of separation in the very forms chosen & stilted, mentalized language.

Amazingly, something of the original may still come through, enough to encourage others to try to do more justice with their own versions. The lens makes a difference to what comes through, whether the lens is the translator or the translation. A similar relationship exists when arts are "translated" across genres & forms, as when adapting a novel to film, or a film to stage, for example. Not all adaptations are created equal, in other words.

Each node makes a difference in the passage, not always in a linear way, so one further away in spacetime & levels of mediation can still get closer nevertheless, & translate that closeness effectively in another form or through another language.

As even Isaac Newton realized, distance may be significant in particular calculations, but only for degrees of influence that reveal connectedness. With Einstein, distance became relative. With quantum physics, it shifted again, all without factoring in the mind. Bring that into the picture & the yardstick for measuring might as well be painted by Salvador Dali or Jackson Pollack.

People, places & even *times* aren't separate, though distance (in space & time as well as in indirectness level of mediated awareness) can also make profound differences. We aren't separate from the sun, but I wouldn't want to get too much closer. In most cases, we can't map the meaning of such "distance" differences with much precision, if at all, being subject to so many conditional and situational variations.

The difference between being actually there and a mediated version can be very great in the case of a disaster, for example, and much less so for a two-person discussion, presidential debate, or some performances. The instruments of transmission & reception make a difference, as in McLuhan's "medium is the message," while even members of the same "class" can have significant differences.

That means someone in another culture hundreds of years & thousands of miles apart may understand (& translate) someone writing in another language incomparably better than members of that writer's immediate family or community (that may even have put him to death). In the realm of the mind, conventional measures of distance simply don't apply. An observer 13.7 billion light-years after a particular cosmic event may ponder that event more closely than other creatures on the same planet 3 or 4 billion years earlier. Or not. Hard to say.

In human terms, it's as if there are many kinds of "wormholes" transcending space-time in the realm of the mind. Hidden threads activated by writing may connect A & Z "as if directly," for example, even with an alphabet of successive generations between them. Just think of your favorite dead poet from long ago.

Or think of loved ones long since passed, where no writing is necessary to activate the embedded strings. A *resonance of influence* can activate, potentially more influential, more central, than influences from countless others less sympathetic in more immediate proximity (of space, time & directness of interaction). Distance is relative, in other words, often non-linear, with no objective standard of measurement.

More critically, perhaps, distance is also changing with the non-static observer, who may even use the mind to change the way of looking—whether telescope, microscope, kaleidoscope, colonoscope, endoscope or logic, music, math, experiments with mirrors. Any of these may reveal the same or related twists, including the logic of the Blind Man's Hat, one of the great mind bugglers.

You probably know it. There are 5 hats, three white, two black. Three are put on three smart fellows without seeing which they're given or which are left over. The first is asked if he knows what color hat he's wearing. He looks at the other two, this, says, "no." The second is asked. He looks at the other two, thinks now one step further, says, "no." The third fellow, who happens to be blind, is asked. He thinks a step further, answers, "yes." What color is his hat & how did he know?

The details of the solution can be found at [www.bodlibrary.net](http://www.bodlibrary.net), but the important aspect here is that the blind man can follow the second man's thinking, as well as the first man's, as well as how the second man processes the first man's thinking along with their observations—the mind within the mind within the mind.

Yet it's not just the nested quality that's of interest, but also the example of progress, development & a cumulative capacity not otherwise present. In the example, all three are equally smart. The first provides his result (but without revealing explicitly what he sees the others are wearing); the second adds the implication of this information to his observation; the third then has all the information he needs, even without new input from his eyes.

In many ways, then, we all “stand on the shoulders of giants,” inhabit an already highly enriched mind-field, or seem to hover above the great pioneers while standing on their graves. To an extent we have no standard of measure, we inhabit the same mind-field as the masters & mothers, as well as the same sometimes predatory soup, mysterious mind(s) & web(s) of life wound up together in an equally mysterious matrix we seem drawn to map, as in Escher's drawing of the hand drawing itself into the scene portrayed.

Here we face those old dilemmas of mapping—only possible with levels of abstraction that artificially render boundaries to what has none. In reality, we are unable to map even an intricately known ocean with much precision, given all its waves, turbulence, tides & constantly shifting bottoms, plates & coastlines, with time, too, a key ingredient in complex ways, not just in one direction or dimension either, with individual waves going out even as a tide comes in, let alone the infinite variations in tipping-points & topographies, interference patterns & amplifications.

So, too, geological details may be folded many times over into today's tangible landscape, showing (along with our genetic make-up) how times overlap, i.e., how a legacy from the past actively operates in the present, even while we (life & mind) operate primarily oriented to the future, looking ahead—to the next word, breath, thought, task, or step, most action, thought, and intentional attention being future-oriented, at varying scales, from the immediate goal to the undefined long term.

What we plant, cut or leave alone helps write the future of a place, for example, as Aldo Leopold pointed out, with potential effects far beyond any visible or conceptual boundaries, affecting soil organisms, butterflies, neighborhood flocks, migrating cranes, ourselves later in time, future generations of life-caretakers & land-stewards, or all of the above.

Nothing exists without a past, and the intricately woven paths that brought it forward. In nature's case, the paths are deeply woven into the living fabric in various, multiply overlapped & complex ways, with countless transmission & feedback mechanisms. Each science discovers new dimensions to add to the map, including trans-locality.

So the sounds, sights & particle-transmissions of the ever-changing earth and far off universe are in our eyes, ears, nose & mouth here & now. Even observed from a single spot, landscapes of land, air, water or cosmos never stay still. Change the angle of view, the resolution, the direction just a twitch, and the image shifts. It can be a totally different world just a few feet out into the sneaker-wave zone, where rip currents churn into sudden depths & drop-offs, whether sensed & not.

The same fractal edge applies to weather and lives in motion between now and later. Sooner or later, later becomes sooner, then *now*, and before you know it, *then*, already downstream, history & beyond, degrees of forgetfulness. Who knows what memory our constituent molecules have turned to earth, ash or smoke? Nevertheless, the weather-bleached field remembers how to turn green again in spring.

I suppose the only cure for thinking we know more than we do is knowing more—&/or better. There are many forms of memory, for example, some of which may even block clearer recognition of reality if not “corrected for,” starting with becoming conscious of. Memory does not seem to be life- or mind-specific, being present in institutions, substances & topographies as well as in DNA, cultures & thought.

In this sense, memory might be considered a property distinct from mind, neither presuming nor denying one might be a sign of the other. The same can be said for emergent complexity, the development of new orders of magnitude through time, as well as the reverse, the divergence into constituent elements in chaotic disintegration & renewal.

It may be there is a necessarily dynamic balance between these, as in the conservation of matter & energy, within which increased levels of order (e.g., individual consciousness with multiply scaled intelligence) inevitably give way to age & decay, simply part of an instrumental cycle of disorder & regeneration. The same pattern may appear at the evolutionary scale, as well as geological & social history.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, we confront the emergence of a mind that seeks (and presumes to have found) aspects of apparent order, sense, coherence, meaning....On the one hand, the thought itself seems so real, it clearly helps shape the world, for better & worse. On the other hand, it's as ephemeral as the electrical activity among neurons—and so seems the world, ourselves included, bringing us back to that most fundamental of dislocations, from the perspective of the self, represented by (the appearance of) individuation and its death.

The individuation may have been largely an illusion all along, but real enough to have significant meaning to that thinking-feeling-witnessing-experiencing individual. Where does that one come from? Where does that one go? And why? We want to know where our departed loved ones are now (besides in us), and our destiny next, if that can be asked at all.

It's like “what precedes the big bang?” Who can speak of “before & after” once you're out of time?

### ***Creatures of the in-between***

In one direction, we look through microscope at worlds of bacteria, viruses, molecules, even atoms, with giant cyclotrons for peering into even smaller worlds still, with theories of what lies within these, beyond what we can see. In the other direction, we look at groups, towns, watersheds, planet, solar system, galaxy, clusters & mega-clusters, to theories of the universe as a whole.

I say, “in one direction,” but directions both in & out are countless, with as many as there are things to look at times ways of looking times orders of imagined magnitude. Smaller worlds & larger worlds are all around (& within) us, yet most time & attention goes to the narrow personal & largely human worlds in-between.

We are creatures of the in-between, living our lives between sleeps, between birth & death, earth & sky, “the devil & the deep blue sea.” Also between “memory & desire,” what’s past & what’s to come, the rear-view mirror & the road ahead, the step taken & the next. All we know is striding on, one place to the next in time.

“Traveler, there is no path. Paths are made by walking,” wrote Antonio Machado. We are the walkers, even sitting still, fingers & eyes moving on along each phrase, breath, & line. Mind reads between the lines as well, between the phrases, between the words that flow through— wherever they come from, wherever they go, like the breath.

The breather, too, is in-between—inside & out, two universes joined in each inspiration & expiration. Between coming & going, ignorance & knowing. What do we know better than our ignorance? Of what are we more ignorant than our knowing? Only the being thereof, what it is that knows & doesn’t, feels & doesn’t, follows & makes its path.

In between source & destination, the one path & countless paths, we are always in transit, while thoughts, feelings, molecules, actions are in transit through us.....