Preparation for the October 8, 2025 Topical Seminar

The Power of Ideas

"You can kill a man, but you can't kill an idea." (Medgar Evers)

For the seminar, please read these instructions carefully, explore the embedded links, and then write a response of at least 200 words. There are writing prompts at the end, but feel free to respond as you wish. Email your written response to lewesseminar@gmail.com no later than Monday, October 6. Please read all the posted responses **prior** to the seminar meeting on Wednesday, October 8, at 3 pm.

## Instructions

This month we will explore the power of ideas. Arguably, ideas and concepts have done more to shape human history than any single event or person. Ideas can alter how we think of ourselves and others and how societies organize themselves. They can change what we value, and how we envision the future. Important ideas shape our laws, our institutions, our place in the world, and define our sense of what is possible.

Let's begin with a short video from Jason Silva that captures the transformative potential of an idea: [The Power of Ideas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWwSqSirnis).

**Why do ideas matter?**

The French writer Ernest Dimnet once said, “Ideas are the root of creation,” and Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “There is no prosperity, trade, art, city, or great material wealth of any kind, but if you trace it home, you will find it rooted in a thought of some individual man.” Even those who consider themselves "practical" are not immune to the influence of ideas. The economist John Maynard Keynes wrote:

*“Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves 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.”[[1]](#footnote-0)*

The *Best Ideas Network* (Brock Institute) offers three reasons why ideas are so powerful in a short blog post:

1. Ideas rule the world.
2. Ideas fuel human progress.
3. Ideas can grow exponentially.

Ideas, though, are like everything else. There are bad ideas, good ideas, and occasionally great ideas. You might want to think about how to tell the difference. Here is a short article that explores this topic: [Good Ideas and Great Ideas](https://digitaltonto.com/2011/good-ideas-and-great-ideas/).

**Ideas Shape History**

In this [blog article](https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/power-of-ideas-in-shaping-history#:~:text=Ideas%20have%20the%20power%20to,societal%20attitudes%20and%20legal%20frameworks), Sarah Lee discusses the power of ideas in shaping history.

Perhaps one of the most moving examples of an idea that not only shaped a life but also fueled a movement that changed the course of history is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "[*I Have a Dream*" speech](https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm).[[2]](#footnote-1) Delivered on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King's speech drew upon the foundational idea of the Declaration of Independence: that all men are guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." A particularly striking idea from his speech—one that resonates in our own challenging times—is his declaration that "we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt."

**Ideas in Our Own Lives**

When we reflect on the major influences in our lives, we often think of personal experiences or people who have made a difference. While these are undeniably important, ideas can also shape our personal journeys.

## Writing Prompts

*Note: Because we likely vary significantly in the ideas we choose to discuss and we discuss them, please try to craft your response in ways that invite conversation.*

1. Identify what you believe to be the single most influential idea in human history—whether for good or ill. What is the idea, and why do you think it is so important?
2. How do destructive ideas, such as eugenics or racial supremacy, gain widespread acceptance? What conditions make a society vulnerable, and what are the most effective ways to combat them?
3. In what ways do our mediums of communication—from art and literature to modern digital technology and memes—shape the power and spread of ideas? Discuss a specific idea whose impact was fundamentally changed by the medium that carried it. Perhaps consider here memes such as Pepe the Frog, Dark Brandon, or the Nasty Woman.
4. In what ways do art, music, and literature serve as powerful vehicles for transmitting, challenging, or reinforcing dominant societal or political ideas? Share a specific creative work that you believe successfully shaped or changed public consciousness.
5. Beyond the Western tradition, what are some influential non-Western ideas (like Confucianism's "Mandate of Heaven" or the southern African concept of "Ubuntu") that offer powerful alternative perspectives on governance, community, or ethics?
6. Describe an idea that changed you personally. It could be from a book, a film, a conversation, or a moment of reflection. What was the idea, and what was its impact on your life's trajectory?
7. Over the next 30 to 50 years what ideas do you think might emerge that fundamentally change the arc of history? Why?

# References

Best Ideas Network. (n.d.). **Why ideas matter**. [Three Reasons Why Ideas Matter - The Brock Institute](https://brockinstitute.org/idea/three-reasons-why-ideas-matter/)

Dimnet, E. (n.d.). **Ideas are the root of creation** [Quote]. [Ernest Dimnet Ideas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Dimnet#:~:text=Ernest%20Dimnet%20(1866%2D1954),and%20reasoning%20during%20the%201930s)

Emerson, R. W. (n.d.). **Essays** [Quote]. Retrieved from https://emersoncentral.com

Keynes, J. M. (2018). **The general theory of employment, interest, and money**. Springer. (Original work published 1936)

King, M. L., Jr. (2020). **I have a dream** [Speech transcript]. National Archives. (Original speech delivered 1963)

Lee, S. (n.d.). **The power of ideas in shaping history** [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://exampleblog.com

Silva, J. (2012). \*The power of ideas\* [Video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com

1. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Book VI, Chapter 24, Section V (1936). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. If you have time, it is worth listening to Kings’ speech. His cadence and intonation give power to his words and ideas. The audio link is at the beginning of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)