

Doubting Original Thought

An Essay on Descartes' Meditations

Written by
Mark S. Lawton
For the Graduate Institute at
St. John's College
Summer '02

Descartes began his Meditations on First Philosophy by doubting everything and then was led by way of reason to his famous claim that “Cognito ergo sum.” Yet, because his thinking was done with words, he may not have, in fact, disassociated all that he intended. His thoughts were rooted in language that were learned and inculcated through the exact types of experience he was attempting to doubt. Perhaps then, his reasoning was faulty and the claim is untenable.

On the other hand, if Descartes’ doubting process was thorough and sufficient enough he may have been able to escape language altogether. Descartes actually acknowledged the tension between these two possibilities and he was conflicted about his relationship to language:

“But meanwhile I marvel at how prone my mind is to errors. For although I am considering these things within myself silently and without words, nevertheless I seize upon words themselves and I am nearly deceived by the ways in which people commonly speak... But a person who seeks to know more than the common crowd ought to be ashamed of himself for looking for doubt in common ways of speaking.” (32)

That Descartes may have freed himself from language intrigues me and prompts me to investigate my own thinking. I notice that much of the time my thoughts do not lead to spoken language that reflects the underlying notions of my mind. Even more distressing is the fact that the thoughts themselves are not an accurate representation of my mind. My thoughts have a “dialogue” with my mind but 99% of the exchange is dictated by the language structures of my thought.

For example, in 1984 I “came up” with a method for speeding up the process of Magnetic Resonance Imaging. The thought process that generated this protocol was original for my colleagues but nonetheless driven by the language (and structures) of problem solving

that were all too familiar from studying math and science. The entire process, from conception to publication, was driven by the accepted language. Thus my thesis was original but not Original. When I preoccupy myself with the strife of the Middle East I use the language of politics, history, and conflict. As a teacher, I plan my lessons using the language of multiple intelligences, pedagogy, and time constraints.

There are however moments (that 1%) when my mind seems to be free of language based thought. When I say just the right thing at just the right time, without premeditation or rehearsal, to form a bond with another person I sense access to Originality. I recall, for example, a time when I brought two adult soccer antagonists together in a meeting by noting, in an instinctual way, that they were both exhausted by their conflict. Howard Gardner, guru of multiple intelligences, would say that I demonstrated emotional intelligence. I wonder, in turn, if this is one way to access Original thought; that is, let emotions drive action.

When I rock-climb my thinking process seems to come to a halt and my movement up the route seems completely un-cognitive. Perhaps endorphins turn off the language of usual thought and allow Original thought to control.

I wonder if I can understand Original thought without succumbing to the restraints of language, which, in fact, do not characterize it. Perhaps using indirect questions, as Hume does, will be efficacious. I ask then: Does Original thought exist? What generates Original thought? Why doesn't it manifest itself in language more often?

I conclude that Original thought exists as the source of original language. Language developed out of the need to express Original thought. Modern man pays homage to his primitive ancestors' Original thought by using his fully formed faculty of language.

Moreover, I wonder about the progress of science and its relationship to Original thought. Can all scientific innovation be attributed solely to the ability of language to investigate and solve problems? Let us consider the story of Newton and his apple. The apple falls – kerplunk. Newton asks “Why?” He posits the existence of a force and the scientific method is off and running. This could be explained purely in terms of language. The *object* is the apple, the *problem* is the fall, the *solution* is the force, and the subsequent investigation is the *narrative*. On the other hand, what prompts Newton to wonder in the first place? What is the nature of the transaction between Newton's senses and his mind? Can his senses interact with his language based thought without passing through Original thought?

Perhaps Descartes' wax can provide some insight. Descartes shows that all of the sense data is unreliable. When heated, his wax melts and changes shape, its fragrance disappears, it no longer emits sound when rapped with his knuckle. He concludes that it is his mind not his imagination (thought) that apprehends the essence of the wax - its mutability, extension, and flexibility. This implies that Newton's thoughts are tied up with sense data while his mind/Original thought is at work apprehending the essence of the question or at least that there is a question.

Where does this leave us? It seems that Original thought is always present and, to some degree, active. Why, then, does it feel so subservient to language based thought? After all, language based thought is largely driven by the senses which are more primitive than the mind and thus should take a back seat.

There seems to be an a-priori aversion to non-language based thought that, I suspect, transcends cultures. What are the characteristics of Original thought that are so disarming? Time, psychology, and will to live seem to conspire against Original thought. Let us look at each. Kant claims that man has an a-priori understanding of time and space. Certainly our senses provide data, and we transact our lives, in time. The senses initiate thoughts that follow one after another in time. Professor if this note is still here then your student plagiarized my paper from pnca.edu slash tilda mlawton This statement follows that statement which follows that question that was led to by that conundrum and the other enigma. We think in time. Original thought, on the other hand, must exist outside of time and thereby is at odds with our a-priori comportment to apprehend the world through space and time.

At the same time, one's psychological make-up appears to be a powerful force in stifling Original thought. The psyche is largely, if not completely, determined by the experiences of life. All of these have taken place not only in time but also in language. There is no way to escape the language of experiences. Even experiences that have been suppressed, good or bad, are suppressed with their language. A man's memory of his argumentative

father is buried with the arguments, a teenaged-mother suppresses the pain of a lost childhood along with the language of the circumstances, and an aging immigrant can no longer remember the meadows of her homeland nor the names of the places. To allow Original thought to flourish, one must suspend consideration of one's psyche and its language based accoutrements. To remove the "I" from oneself is a very tall order.

Finally, there seems to be positive feedback between the will to live, the senses and language based thought (and I say this in a negative sense). The primitive needs of the body (food, shelter, and reproduction) predispose us to language based thought: "Where will I work so I can eat? How can I solve this problem, so I don't get fired? Who shall I marry so I can have kids?" We quickly end up leading a life that answers these questions and generates new ones: "Shall I turn up the heat on the vegetables? Publish this paper? Have a vasectomy?" To eat, reproduce, and have shelter lead to a never ending cycle of language based thought. It is a wonder that any Original thought sees the light of day.

When, then, does Original thought manifest? I suspect that the answer lies in the very same factors that inhibit it. First, I must suggest, however, that Original thought is always active, able, willing, and poised to appear. For this I can not provide evidence; although, one might find it in a self-help book.

The psyche must be in a condition to suspend its reliance on reason and give emotions an opportunity to surface. There must be a time when one is not cognizant of time and of course, the needs of life must be temporarily met. Under these conditions, Original

thought may emerge. Perhaps this magical three-dimensional harmonic convergence is a fiction of my imagination. Yet, I can not, in my language based thinking, arrive at another explanation for non-language based thought. Trying to grasp Original Thought is, indeed, very problematic. Perhaps Original thought will make its brief appearances on its own terms and I can only wait for it with anticipation. In the meantime, if by doubting I remove my “I,” suspend time, and ignore my needs then Original thought might be mine. I doubt it.