

Quote 3

“Thinking reed. It is not in space that I must look for my dignity, but in the organization of my thoughts. I shall have no advantage in owning estates. Through space the universe grasps and engulfs me like a pinpoint; through thought I can grasp it.”

A crying baby leaves the womb, her cries resonating off the walls as she enters into the world. This sentient, small organism, wrapped in swaths of cloth and tucked under her mother’s arms, takes its first breath. What is the commonality between this newly birthed baby and all the other humans that inhabit the same world as her? Is it that they all have a pair of eyes, two arms, and two legs? Or maybe it is that they can all laugh to express joy or cry when they feel pain. In truth, it is that they are all capable of thought. Everyone who was born into this world has, to a certain degree, the capability to formulate their own thoughts, and it is arguably one of the most important aspects that make up our existence. In his 1999 work, *Pensees*, Blaise Pascal asserts that it is thought, not space, in which humans find their dignity. Through thought, humans can grasp the universe. His quote raises a vital question: is thought truly such a valuable asset to mankind? And if so, what about it makes it as such? In this essay, I will first break down Blaise Pascal’s quote, then examine whether or not humans are capable of truly having independent thought in the first place. Next, I will expand upon Pascal’s interpretation of thought, arguing that the act of thinking can only achieve the outcomes in which he claims if paired with the rational faculties of our mind, and then examine thought’s role in today’s society.

In examining Pascal’s quote, it is crucial to break down its key terms to find out what they insinuate. Essentially, Pascal argues that humans find their dignity in the organization of their thoughts, not in material objects. It is through thought that we can begin to grasp the universe that we live in, and it is through thought that we gain advantages for ourselves. For the purposes of this essay, we will define thought as the sensations, ideas, or opinions we formulate within our minds. I will argue that in his quote, Pascal oversimplifies the act of thinking and the outcomes in which it leads to – the outcomes being (1) finding our dignity and (2) beginning to grasp the world around us. I will argue for a more nuanced interpretation of thinking which will allow us to achieve said outcomes: thinking, not only by itself, but paired with rationality and logic.

I – Thoughts: are they truly ever ours?

Before we continue, it is necessary to answer the question of whether or not our thoughts can ever be of our own original creation, independent of the world around us. For if they are not, and if genuine independent thought is impossible, then it would be pointless to continue examining how the organization of our individual thoughts serves as a valuable asset to us. Some argue that genuine, original thought is impossible. Although we come into this world with minds similar to that of a blank slate, *tabula rasa*, it is argued that our thoughts are never truly our own but are the culmination of all that we’ve seen, experienced, and gained from the world around us and from the people that we’ve met. Furthermore, some point to linguistic limitations that hinder the full capabilities of our thoughts – we will only ever be able to think within the boundaries of our language. Only what is able to be expressed into words in our given language is what is able to be expressed in our thoughts, which poses a great limitation in our ability to independently formulate them. However, I beg to disagree with the notion that one can never truly formulate their own original thoughts. As Descartes famously declared: *Cogito ergo sum – I think therefore I am*. In essence, while everything else in reality may be questioned, the act of us questioning and the act of us formulating our thoughts confirms that we exist, even if the objects around us could possibly be but a mere illusion. Although our thoughts may be, in some way, shape, or form, influenced by our past experiences, humans are still capable of

critically analysing the world that we live in. Society could not have progressed this far if everyone's thoughts relied solely on their past experiences and on the norms perpetuated by others in their society. Progress was only made through those who were able to think originally and those who formulated new ideas that went against the status quo. Therefore, although it is true that we are influenced by the outside world, to an extent, humans are capable of genuine thought – the act of analysing, the act of questioning, and the act of judging are all ways in which we exercise independent thought, and these acts are core to the very essence of philosophy.

II – Thoughts, Reason, and Logic

Now that we have proved humans to be capable of independent thought to a certain degree, let us now examine Pascal's quote further. I argue that although Pascal is right in believing in the importance of thought, he risks oversimplification by declaring that thought is the one thing in which we find our dignity and the one thing that allows us to understand the universe. Thoughts, by themselves, don't necessarily allow us to achieve the outcomes in which he details. To achieve such outcomes, one must join their thoughts with logic and the rational faculties of their mind.

If thoughts are merely sensations, ideas, or opinions that one formulates in their mind, there is no guarantee that they will all be reasonably sound enough as to pose to be any sort of benefit to us. Some thoughts are purely random and some thoughts that we formulate may not even make logical sense. For instance, take this sequence of thoughts: All dogs are mortal. All cats are not dogs. Therefore, cats must be immortal. Although a silly example, we see that this is a plausible sequence of thoughts that one could formulate as it is a string of words that could originate in the mind. However, as we know that "*all A is equal to B, all C is not equal to A, therefore all C is not equal to B*" is an illogical sequence in and of itself, this thought is unreasonable and the statement proves to be untrue. This goes to show that the thoughts that one formulates does not necessarily entail logical soundness, meaning that not all could serve a beneficial purpose. When thoughts are not reasonably sound, it is clearly of no use to one's desires to find dignity and to grasp reality. Therefore, Pascal's use of "thought" in his quote is too vague and it cannot always pose advantageous, as we have proved that not all human thought is inherently logical.

Now, what separates this "useless" form of thought from the sort that achieves Pascal's claimed outcomes? It is reason and logic. The organization of our thoughts is only valuable when the thoughts are paired with the faculties of our mind in which reason and logic reside. It is impossible to begin grasping reality if our thoughts don't reflect such attributes. We can examine the theory of the Tripartite Soul in order to further understand this. This theory contends that the human soul is composed of 3 parts. It is necessary for reason to lead the other two parts of the soul in order for a human to live well. This goes to show that reason is a crucial tool that our thoughts must utilize in order to best benefit ourselves. In terms of dignity, we can find that feeling of self-worth when we know that our thoughts are reasonable and when we know that we have the power to argue with anyone using sound logic. One cannot find such dignity when their thoughts remain unanchored by the laws of reason and logic, and they would likely be ridiculed in society for their inability to make logical sense. At the same time, when we look to grasp the universe and the world around us, it is through the reasoning behind our thoughts in which we are able to do so. If our thoughts were to parallel the aforementioned sequence about dogs and cats, one cannot hope to truly grasp reality because they will not be able to correctly make sense of it.

III – Thought in Today’s Society

Let us now examine thought and the role that it plays in today’s society, for it is always valuable to connect philosophy to real world contexts. With the increasing interconnectedness of the world, it is more challenging than ever to formulate our own rational thoughts. The rise of artificial intelligence and the spread of entangled social networks has enabled society to gain better access to ideas, but it has also increased our dependence on others to be fed such thoughts. As we open our phones or scroll through our computers, we are constantly bombarded with multitudes of ideas from people all around the globe, when before we only were ever able to obtain such knowledge from our local newspaper or from the radio. Overexposure to such a large amount of ideas in such a short span of time has decreased our brains’ ability to formulate thoughts independent from others and made us more vulnerable to misinformation. In other words, the growing reliance on others or on technology to provide us with answers has decreased our collective ability to think for ourselves. This poses an extreme harm to society, as people end up attempting to grasp reality by relying on others and not by utilizing their own rational faculties, risking their ability to ever continue to be able to do so.

This proves why it is more crucial than ever for our thoughts to be guided by reason in our pursuit of finding dignity and understanding the world around us. Reason is what allows us to formulate sound ideas and critically analyse the world, and in this time and age defined by rapid technological improvements and widespread access to global knowledge, it may be our greatest asset.

To conclude, Pascal is right in asserting the inherent value of our thoughts, however I argue for a more nuanced view of thinking, which must be adjoined with reason and logic, to best achieve the outcomes of finding our dignity and better understanding the world around us. It is through this intersection that a new-born baby or a fully grown adult in this ever-evolving world will ever be able to truly live well.