

THINKING, EXISTING,
WHAT IF INVERSE IS TRUE?

Second Thoughts

By J. B. Leftwich, Columnist

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“Hey I know you,” he said. “You’re Perez McCumbra!”

“I am not Perez McCumbra, I’m afraid you have the wrong man,” I said.

Why in heaven’s name did I say what I said? I was not “afraid” he had the wrong man. There was no fear, no reason for fear. How do such expressions get into our language?

One thing I knew. I knew I wasn’t Perez McCumbra. I know who I am...I think.

I think.

Do I really think? Or do random thoughts run through my mind? Shifting my mind into gear for thinking, as I had to do as a student and later as a teacher; requires more effort than I am ready to exert in my latter years. Therefore, I am satisfied to harbor a *mélange* of passing thoughts. Having thoughts and thinking are different functions.

The great French mathematician and philosopher, Rene Descartes, said: “I think, therefore I am.”

Is the inverse of this statement true? I don’t think, therefore I am not. It sorta bothers me to think I am not. Perhaps the inverse is false.

Remember the old theme subject once tossed out to college freshmen? Write an essay proving you exist. My teachers in college never required this of me. And I am sorry. I wanted to write: “There is no doubt about my existence. The thing that worries me is your existence. Do you really exist? Or, are you simply a figment of my imagination? Am I alone on this planet? Is all the frenetic activity created by hordes of people just thoughts that pass through my mind?”

I am thinking these irrational thoughts, therefore I am. I had always prided myself on this original idea until I discussed it with my friend, Gusto. Replied he: “Yeah, I think about this possibility a lot. Maybe in this conversation with you, I am talking to someone I created. Like Data on Star Trek was created.”

So much for my original idea. At least it was original with me, albeit others had thought of it. Indeed, many original and revolutionary concepts have been created simultaneously by different people in different parts of the world. Logarithms were developed at the same time by two different people, neither knowing the other was working on the idea. Logs led to the slide rule which was superseded by the computer.

And Rene Descartes. He is the father of coordinate geometry. Remember in high school or college math classes? Matching a number with a point using perpendicular axes? But Rene didn't really realize the significance of his discovery. His thesis on coordinate geometry appended a book of essays.

So often the things that bring fame to men and women are accidents or mere footnotes to other ideas. Case in point: Dixon Merritt's famous Pelican limerick. You remember? "A wonderful bird is the pelican; his beak can hold more than his belly can." Mr. Merrit used to tell his journalism students that he wrote the famed limerick, rolled it off of his typewriter onto a pile of papers behind the machine, later retrieved it and used it as filler in a column. He didn't regard it with pride, but those were the most famous lines he ever wrote.

There I stood, considering these thoughts as the fellow who mistook me for Perez McCumbra walked away. Too late I realized there was something I wanted to ask him. So often my good ideas occur on the way home from the committee meeting. Nevertheless, I yelled.

"Wait? Who on earth is Perez McCumbra?"

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