

AGAINST REASON

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I am against the use of the word «reason», written thus without definite or indefinite article. I understand roughly what is meant by reasoning, by «the reason» for an action and by «a reason» for doing or saying something. But when a single entity «reason» is abstracted from these uses I don't think it stands for anything clear at all.

To illustrate my claim, I offer the following examples and I invite readers, in the first place, to see if they can really give any precise meaning to the word «reason» in each case. «If we give up reason we have nothing else to turn to.» [Hirst, O'Connor, 1972].

«...the premise “We must follow reason” [Barrow, 1981].

«...from such debate (on education) reason may emerge triumphant» [Wilson, 1986].

«...recognising the fallibility of our emotional reactions (rarely based on pure reason)...» [Wilson, 1991].

Richard Peters wrote a great deal about «the *demands* of reason» and «the values of reason» but he never addressed the question of what the apparently singular entity «reason» is which makes these demands and has these values. It is usually people who make demands. A situation, for instance, only makes demands if we assume a number of values and purposes to be part of the situation. Faced with a charging elephant, the situation demands that I climb the nearest stout tree – but only because we can take it for granted that I value my life or have an aversion to being trampled on.

Similarly, «reason», or reasoning as I would prefer, makes, and can make, no demands on its own, unless at least one other value is taken for granted. In any process of criticism, for instance, the criteria are values.

I. *What Kind of Entity is «Reason»?*

My inquiry is restricted to the period covered by my four quotations and to writings in Philosophy of Education. Even then, so much has been written that I have had to be selective. I have little quarrel with the older tradition in which I think «reason» can be translated, as Gilbert Ryle has suggested, as a dual faculty – «practical reason» and «theoretical reason». Ryle later refers to these as *capacities* [Ryle, 1972]. I think it would be fairly clear to talk about practical reasoning, theoretical reasoning and the capacity for reasoning.

If «reason» could be translated as «reasoning», I would have little quarrel with its use. In the large volume *Education and the Development of Reason*, however [Dearden et al., 1972], and in the quotations I have given, it is fairly clear that something more than just «reasoning» must be intended. Some particular ways of reasoning are being commended.

«Reason» seems to be something we could give up (but if we did we would have nothing else to turn to), something we could follow, something which may emerge triumphant, something which can be pure, something which can make demands and which can have values. I cannot make satisfactory sense of all of these with any one concept but, since the faculty concept – theoretical and practical reasoning – comes nearest to a fit, I shall adopt it in the criticism which follows, occasionally referring also to the possibility that a set of procedures is intended.

If the demands of reason are to be contrasted with, perhaps, the demands of the senses, then «reason» is presumably something like a sense, or a faculty which propels us in certain directions in given circumstances. Neither reasoning, nor «reason» as a set of procedures, alone can do this. If we focus on «reason» as a set of procedures be followed then, I think, it is people who demand that these procedures be followed. Even then, since the procedures are formal rules, they do not, alone, guide us to action. «Follow reason», as a particular set of procedures, tells us only how to argue, without giving us any substantive premisses to start with. Where the argument leads depends on where the value premises point.

«Reason» is often associated with «truth». Although the word «truth» has a similarly ambiguous status (when used without definite or indefinite

article), at least we are, most of us, aware that Pilate's question has not yet been answered. We are not asked to «follow truth», only to look for it. *The* truth may prevail in a given context but it is not clear what it would mean for «truth» to prevail or emerge triumphant. I note the family resemblance of «reason» and «truth» only in passing, as it were, to draw attention to the danger of dropping the definite and indefinite articles. We can be fairly clear what the demands of *the* law are, in a given country, but it is not clear what «the demands of law» would be. Over-generalisation can be confusing.

My claim is that reasoning depends on the very things with which «reason» is commonly contrasted, emotional commitments, hunches, instincts and passions. Rationalists tend to regard passion, for instance, as leading to error. The plausibility of this connection comes from experience. The passionate lover may not see his beloved clearly. He may not see that her beauty hides a waspish nature or that she would be very difficult to live with. Passion may lead a person to overvalue the object of passion. As Peters pointed out, however, reasoning is itself a passionate business – there are what he called the rational passions. I think what has happened is that the passion for «reason» has prevented philosophers from seeing *their* beloved clearly. They tend to use «reason» and «rational» as emotive pro-words, trading on the tradition, or consensus, going back at least to Aristotle.

In that perspective, my first three examples above begin to look like emotive appeals to the shared personal values of a group of philosophers. There might be little harm in this if the same philosophers did not imply that their «reason» or reasoning could be pure, impartial, free of emotional bias, impersonal, with connotations of «objectivity».

If it is more than a high-sounding flourish, what can be meant by the phrase «If we give up reason...»? I find it very hard to say but, since the advocates of «reason» commonly contrast it with passions, hunches, instincts and intuitions, presumably if we abandon «reason» we would rely on, or turn to, these other things. If so, then we do have at least these other things to turn to. If that is correct, then what Hirst and O'Connor mean is that we have nothing else *worth* turning to. That is rather different and makes explicit the value judgement contained in their claim. The sentence has the *form* of a statement but it is beginning to look more like an exhortation «Don't abandon reasoning». The import of this is similar to Barrow's «premise that you must follow reason», I think.

I doubt if it is possible for normal human beings altogether to give up reasoning. Almost any form of coherent thinking requires some degree of reasoning, but I am more concerned with what I think is meant (and at least seems to make some sense) i.e. «Rely on reasoning *rather than* on

hunches, emotional commitments and passions.» On this interpretation, if reason emerges triumphant, as John Wilson wishes, people will rely on reasoning and *not* on hunches, etc. Perhaps our emotional reactions would then be based on «pure» reasoning.

It seems to me that this misleading in an important sense. Analysis of any actual process of reasoning which leads to a decision will always reveal, I think, a point at which reasoning relies on some kind of emotional commitment or more or less passionately held *value* other than reasoning itself. There can be no conclusion without one or more premisses. Where and how we «find» our premisses is a mysterious business, very much akin to the question of where a scientist gets his hypotheses from. My point is simply that we cannot reason without premisses. If circularity and regress are to be avoided, we have to choose some premisses for which no further reason can be given. Hunches alone are unreliable; they need checking, but I am not sure that we can do entirely without them in our reasoning.

My case is clearest, I think, with concepts like education. Any conclusion that education «is» (i.e. ought to be seen as) say, centrally concerned with knowledge and understanding would make no sense if knowledge and understanding were not valued. If it were simply an empirical claim that promoting knowledge and understanding is what people actually do in educating, then empirical values would be at work. (It is not intended to be an empirical claim.) A conclusion that education «is» initiation into worthwhile activities depends on a different set of values about how things ought to be, or are best described. The implicit claim is that this is how we *want* to use words.

The concept of education is a particularly «value-laden» one because education is man-made activity: our actions, guided by our values, create the activity *and* the concept. We also create the concepts, «stick», «stone», «tiger» and «orange» (and we are guided by our interests/values in doing this) but we do not create sticks, stones, tigers or oranges by our actions.

Also implicit in the phrase «worthwhile activities» and in the related question «What knowledge is of most worth?» is that what we want in educating a child is an increase in value, both for ourselves and for the child we value, for whom we care.

We cannot, I think, make sense of any action or conclusion, based on however much reasoning, without reliance on things very much like hunches, instincts, passions and emotional commitments; these are the raw materials without which reasoning could not start.

I am not, of course, saying that we should rely on hunches *without* reasoning, only that things like hunches and gut reactions will be found to

lie at the end (or beginning) of any chain of reasoning. There are, and there have to be, points, sometimes called «reason stoppers», where we suspend the demand for further questioning. The procedures suggested by reasoning and experience are useful in dealing with and coordinating our (other) values but if these procedures are presented as «good in themselves» or somehow «constitutive of the good life» we have a situation which I have elsewhere parodied as «Reason told us reason was good – and got away with it» [Colbeck, 1987]. One particular package of values escaped rational scrutiny, partly because the values were not usually identified *as* values and partly because of a mistaken idea that it was impossible to question the value of questioning.

There do seem to be points at which we want to say «I *cannot* think or feel otherwise. It has nothing to do with my values». The history of scientific revolutions suggests that this situation obtains only until events make us *want* a new hypothesis which enables us to think otherwise. Intractable difficulties with the earth-centred view made scientists willing to entertain hitherto unthinkable movements of a «fixed» earth. These movements were contrary to the weight of evidence available in the perspective of the time. (It is still contrary to the direct evidence of our senses to believe that our solid earth is spinning and hurtling through space at about 60,000 miles an hour). Relativity and quantum mechanics seem to be driving us to think things we could not think before about the nature of reality. Observations are theory-laden, it seems, and all explanations are interest-relative. Elegance and simplicity influence acceptance of a new theory.

It is a «hunch», hypothesis or intuition of rationalists that more reasoning will improve the quality of life. This is only the case, I think, if reasoning is based on (other) good values, premisses or hunches.

The fact that reasoning seems able to show us that our gut reactions or emotional commitments are mistaken makes it look as if reasoning is somehow superior or as if it can be in control.

If my reasoning is correct, however, reasoning can only show that one emotional commitment is mistaken by reference to another. A mistake, more generally, can only be identified by reference to a value or purpose with which the mistaken action conflicts. Reasoning itself is something to which we may be more or less emotionally committed but we require (other) emotional commitments before reasoning has anything to do. Reasoning cannot happen *in vacuo*.

I think similar confusion surrounds use of the word «rational» when, for instance, John White writes «Since there is no point in going for what is

less rational...» [White, 1986]. Unless an action is completely random there is always *some* point in going for it. To decide whether action A is more rational than action B one has to examine the reasons (usually values) in favour of action A and to compare these, in number and importance, with the reasons for action B. One also, of course, needs to consider the reasons against A and B. «More rational» must surely mean «better, more strongly, supported by reasons»? Judgements of what is more or less rational do not get off the ground without reference to the purposes and values which act as reasons.

There is a tendency for «rational» to function rather like «good» in the writings of rationalist philosophers. In John White's paper, «rational» or «rationality» occur some twenty five times in eleven pages with no attempt to explain the concept of rationality.

II. Why does it Matter?

Since I am not against reasoning, does it matter if philosophers pepper their papers with «reason» and «rational»? It matters, I think, because it results in a neglect of the value component in education. (The need for values to provide criteria in criticism seems also to be neglected.) In my view, before autonomy, for instance, or knowledge and understanding have any value for a person, the person has to have (other) values. An autonomous person is one who has his or her own values and commitments. Why strive for knowledge and understanding? The motivation and justification for these pursuits comes, I think, from valuing the things or people to be known and understood. It makes little sense to want to know about things which have no value. The mindless wrecker of telephone booths does not necessarily know too little but he values too little. Of what benefit is it to anyone if people emerge from schools with a wide range of liberal knowledge and understanding which they do not value?

III. Values

Peters referred to the ideal implicit in Socrates' saying that the unexamined life is not worth living. I would want to change the emphasis and put first the tautology that the life without values is not worth living. Implicit in both sayings is that we want life to be more worth living.

Behind what I say is the conviction that educating should be, first, a process of helping people to *value* more [1] – more widely and more deeply

– and thus to make their lives more value-full and more valuable; that, I think, is the justification, for us and for our pupils, for wanting to know and understand more. It is «profitable», in value terms, to love (or value) our neighbours/pupils as ourselves. Our valuing of them adds to their value as it also adds value to our own lives. We acquire value by valuing and by being valued. It is also profitable, in these terms, to pursue the ability to learn (or intelligence) because, in general, each new value learned opens the way to other new values. That is what is so exciting about education – a potential for exponential growth in value. (In education of children, the best values are those which lead on to further increase in value.) This, if accepted, tackles the problem of motivation which is almost totally missing from knowledge and understanding «for their own sake» unless, like philosophers, you already value these. A value is a motivating and a justifying reason for action: a reason for action always refers to one or more values. Values are necessary as criteria in criticism or judgement. The more values you have, the more reasons for action and for judgement you have and, I think, the more valuable your life.

If I valued, *per impossibile*, nothing, I would have no value. I would not even value life. No intentional action would make sense. (Nihilism does not make sense for anyone who continues to breathe and eat.)

This is no more than a sketch of the concept of a value as something to which we are positively, additively, emotionally attached. It needs considerable expansion in a separate paper but this much is needed to indicate the direction in which I suggest a change of emphasis.

For *some* people, notably for academics and philosophers, knowledge and understanding, the pursuit of truth, etc. may be their most important values (although, even then, I hope they would not, in practice, value these pursuits at the expense of people.) We should resist attempts, via education, to promote knowledge and understanding as the most important values for everyone. Academic pursuits do extend *one* (wide) set of values but we need educators and philosophers whose values are wider than that, for everyone's sake.

Conclusion

I have tended to equate «reason» with «reasoning» because reasoning is the only single entity which I can confidently identify in the package of values to which I think philosophers refer when they use the word «reason». The «something more» which is implied by the word «reason» in the volume *Education and the Development of Reason* seems to be a varying package of

values which would be more clearly dealt with separately. Even a bald list of them is lengthy – too long, I would claim, to come under the umbrella of one word.

I am unrepentant in suggesting that the uses of «reason» in the examples I gave at the start of this paper (and they are only a small sample) are, at best, unclear or «mushy». At worst, they are seriously misleading. The first statement is misleading if, as I believe, «reason» (whatever, if anything, it is) is far from the only thing to which we can turn. Indeed, we cannot turn to «it» alone, since it depends on other values which we have to use to guide us. In the second example, we cannot «follow reason», unless this simply means «engage in reassembling». Objectivity, autonomy, impartiality and «rational» procedures are formal principles which give us nothing to follow (except in argument). In the third example, it is far from clear what the world would be like if «reason» were to «emerge triumphant». Presumably there would be more («rational«?) argument and philosophers would be powerful. In the fourth example, there is no such thing as «pure», or value-free reasoning on which to base our emotional commitments.

I happen to approve of many of «the demands of reason» promoted (clearly but, in my view, naively) by Richard Peters but I am not clear what it is that they are the demands of. The demands are more clearly, less arrogantly described, I think, as a particular set of values.

I largely share these philosophical values but philosophers are not immune from the tendency to have an unclear vision of the object of their passion. A wider set of values would enable us to put the values associated with «reason» into a clearer, more valuable perspective. In this perspective, by referring to other values (and *using* reasoning), it is possible to subject reasoning itself to rational scrutiny. This should enhance the value and the power of reasoning by making it self-critical.

Valuing without reasoning would be haphazard, uncoordinated, almost impossible; reasoning without (other) values would be vacuous, nihilistic, almost impossible.

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NOTES

- [1] I owe the idea of education for increase in value to Dr Pat Wilson. (Unpublished paper read at the Cambridge branch of the philosophy of Education Society in 1972. A considerably amended version was published as «Interests and Educational Values» in *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society*, Vol. VIII, N.º 2 1974).

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SUMARIO: CONTRA LA RAZÓN.

La palabra «razón» usada, además, sin artículo definido o indefinido, es, en el mejor de los casos, confusa y en el peor conduce claramente a error. «Racional» y «Racionalidad» son términos igualmente poco claros.

En este trabajo se exponen ejemplos para examinar esas implicaciones. Lo que quiero denunciar es que la palabra «razón» es usada por los filósofos racionalistas de la educación para un variado número de valores, los cuales no son presentados *como* tales valores. Estos valores son demasiado numerosos y variados para ser recogidos en una palabra.

Una segunda crítica estriba en que los que usan esa palabra, a menudo, deducen que «razón» es una entidad singular que puede —por ella misma— hacer peticiones, conseguir que se sigan o modificarlas. Esto lleva a error porque el razonamiento depende de valores (distintos al razonamiento) para actuar como criterio, justificación o motivación de decisiones, juicios y acciones. Las razones para decidir son valores.

Como conclusión, se ofrece un breve esquema del concepto de valor como aquello a lo que una persona está unida positiva y emocionalmente. Así, dentro de una red de valores más amplios que los de la «razón», el razonamiento puede llegar a ser más valioso, poderoso y autocrítico.

KEY WORDS: Reason. Values. Philosophy of Education.