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On Reason

Michael Christison, Editor

It challenges us to face the truth. It tells us when we are wrong. It can sometimes bewilder us with its brutal simplicity. Some call it logic or rational thinking. Others refer to it as “pure reason.” Whatever you want to call it, we have no choice but to utilize this cognitive ability if we want to achieve our goals. Few, however, tend to figure out what it is that they are doing. If you cannot explain reason, it becomes that much harder to justify any given action. If an action is not taken according to reason, a justification will become harder still. The biggest issue at hand is that many people become so accustomed to a life of emotional whim, that it leads to a neglecting of their more useful mental faculties. Believe what you will about the best kind of life, but there is no denying that when such people need help in supporting some claim, their friendly neighborhood reason is nowhere to be found.

There are cases in which we might think we are making good use of reason when we are not, and a deeper understanding would help us notice.¹ For instance, it is illogical to make a presumptuous generalization about an individual's habits based on a limited set of attributes. Say Jim-Bob often wears cowboy hats, and I draw the conclusion that he also listens to country music. There might be some legitimate correlation between cowboy hat-donning people and people who listen to country music, but this does not mean the connection I have made is logical. What I am doing in actuality is taking a single case and comparing it to a general pattern I have experienced. If I were to treat my conclusion as fact, there would be no basis for it. What I have observed is other cowboy hat-wearing people listening to country music, not Jim-Bob. Therefore, I am making a prediction about something I do not know first-hand from experience, and I should treat it as just that: a prediction.

It is first important to make clear this predictive mode of thought

1 I will not address the issue from a neuro-biological standpoint, but from a standpoint grounded in, ironically, the content itself: experience-based reason. The goal of this project is to present reason in a simplified and digestible form, away from complex abstractions like the popular uses of “deduction” and “induction,” and the current epistemological debates.

so as to distinguish it from what reason consists of in essence. Humans are pattern-seeking creatures. We see that certain situations are similar to other situations that we have encountered in the past. Then we compare them as I have between Jim-Bob and the previous cowboy hat wearers. We could, perhaps, go further and claim that certain generalizations follow all my initial perceptions of stimuli in the world. Yet, these observations do not capture the essence of reason, for we still have no criterion that is specific enough to help us decide which generalizations are correct and which are not. Although noticing similarity and judging how the future will be is necessary for our survival, living only with this limited understanding makes us more prone to incorrect judgment. Examining the conscious process should help to enlighten us.

When we reason consciously about reality,² it is a result of our desire to explain the way reality is rather than the way it could be. Our goal is to answer a why question, typically concerning two alternative events. I might trip over something, thus spurring a desire to discover the cause. I would have to answer the question: “Why did I trip rather than continue to walk?” Perhaps there was a crack jutting up from the sidewalk, or there was an object in my path that I failed to notice. I might even consider some sort of divine intervention.³ These would be considered causal explanations, but similar uses of reason would also extend to *non-causal* explanations.

For example, Xanthippe’s becoming a widow when Socrates died is non-causal. The formal definition of cause requires that there be temporal distance between two events, and there is usually a noticeable physical interaction between the objects in the events. Yet, there is no window of time between Socrates’ death and Xanthippe’s becoming a widow. Furthermore, there is clearly no physical interaction relating the events. The relation instead appears to be a logical one.

If I wanted an explanation for Xanthippe’s becoming Socrates’ widow, there is a specific list of statements that is both sufficient and necessary: 1) Xanthippe was married to Socrates; 2) Socrates died; and 3) When a person’s husband dies at time(*t*), that person is a widow at *t*. This might not always be the answer someone gives in its entirety, but whichever is not said of these three statements would have to be logically implied.

2 Thinking actively, paying attention to the thoughts themselves.

3 Peter Lipton in *Inference to the Best Explanation* argues that this type of explanation would show a causal relation.

This type of logical connection is the basis of reason and encompasses both causal and non-causal relations. It is called *dependence*, and it takes the logical form: If not A, then not B. Xanthippe's becoming a widow is dependent upon the death of Socrates, and if Socrates had not died at *t*, Xanthippe would not have become a widow at *t*. Moreover, if we take away any of steps (1)-(3), Xanthippe would not have become Socrates' widow. The event is dependent upon every step.

We recognize relations of dependence not only between particulars as in the previous two examples, but also between types when we generate definitions.⁴ Take the statement, "All water consists of two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule." If not for this combination of molecules, a particular substance could not be identified as water. Similarly, we notice a chair is for sitting. If the object is not meant for sitting, then it is not a chair. Dependence relations are integral to the identification of essential characteristics.

In this sense, particular and type relations go hand in hand. We observe that there is a definition involving dependence relations that tell us what a chair is. Then when we encounter some particular object in the world that satisfies the conditions put forth in the type-definition, we can take action based upon that. If I want to sit down somewhere, however, it is not necessary that I stop and think about the definition of something before I sit down. What is required is that I recognize which objects I can sit on and which I cannot. Regardless of what I would be thinking consciously before choosing where to sit, there would be relations of dependence my brain would have to recognize before I could act. If I were to give some criterion, then, by which we could distinguish reason from other thought processes in the way I have defined it, it would be this: *At the very least, if the content of your conscious thought process involves an accurate relation of dependence, you are making use of reason.*⁵

Certain areas of my explanation may seem obvious to some or complex to others, but my main point is this: we often take reason for granted in action. The logical thought processes by which we live our lives happen so quickly, that at certain points we do not slow down and reason

4 "Particulars" denote individual/unique things and "types" denote a kind/category of thing.

5 There are many responses that can be made and more ramifications to explain, but that is for another essay.

consciously when we ought to. When we do slow down, sometimes we realize that we had not been applying logic correctly in action. In regard to Jim-Bob, I did not ask myself if this statement is true or false: "If Jim-Bob does not wear a cowboy hat, he would not listen to country music." If I had, I would realize that there is no connection of dependence here.

Most people live more by predictive generalization rather than conscious reasoning. The consequences are not always so dire, but this habit tempers our minds to continue predicting when the situation warrants a reasoned response. If we decide to live, none of us can ever escape from actual relations of dependence, and even when acting without conscious thought, we all make judgments about how things are dependent upon one another. We have to judge, for instance, that it has been good to eat and drink and sleep in the past if we want to take reasonable life-sustaining actions for the future. If we cannot escape from these actual relations, we may as well embrace them and work to excel at using the one mental faculty that can calculate them. Understanding how we use reason on a more conscious level can help us in situations when we do not think very consciously. It would be difficult to slow down to think more deeply for every action in our lives, but if we do this more often, we should theoretically get quicker at it and better at it.