

A brief philosophy of reasoning

Introduction

Thinking, knowledge and understanding appear intertwined and provide a gateway for reasoning. Once ajar, we may take many paths in our desire to create meaning. We may weigh up the arguments, form a view or conclude insufficient or inadequate material is available. On deeper reflection we may feel gaps still exist.

Reasoning is based on what we actually know and can comprehend, and is limited by both. It appears affected by our experiences in life, our emotions, our attitudes and a host of other factors that suggest understanding varies as we are all different. Age may play a part too as our reasoning mechanisms may change over time.

The paper centres on elements that come together to enable us to reason. The place of logic and language is not discussed, nor the reality of our take on things, let alone what constitutes truth. Just when we think we have a handle on reasoning, ten possible conflicts are posed that may upset the apple cart. Whist the cart may not overturn some of our apples may be strewn across the road.

Several important aspects of reasoning are discussed. Further reflection may throw up many questions to ponder on and possible omissions.

Reasoning and Plato's Republic

A much quoted saying is that the whole of Western Philosophy is footnotes to Plato. Greatly admired by Socrates, his teacher, Plato is regarded by many as the greatest philosopher of all time. He was thirty one when Socrates died and after his death circulated a series of dialogues. The protagonist, Socrates, quizzed his interlocutors about morals, virtue and politics and by implication ethics.

Plato soon exposed the frailty of their arguments and the justifications and excuses for their actions through reasoned analysis. His motives were defiance to bravely reassert and reinforce the condemned teachings of Socrates and to rehabilitate his mentor's reputation as a much valued teacher, and not a corrupter of young men.

Plato's Republic centres on a seemingly simple question: is it always better to be just than unjust? This contribution to ethical debate focuses on a discussion of what the virtue of justice is and why a person should be just. Reasoning lies at the heart.

The Republic is not solely concerned with ethics, morals and politics but is a dialogue on how knowledge can dictate and what this means. Much of the dialogue concerns moral psychology, a foundational pillar of politics in Plato's view and that of Socrates.

Knowledge

This underpins reasoning and, according to Plato, involves the slightly shaky concept of justified true belief (tripartite theory of knowledge). But what is knowledge and how do we recognise it? A broad definition is facts, information, data, awareness, familiarity and subject skills gained that may be acquired in various ways.

This begs many questions, not least when does information etc become knowledge? Psychological processes appear to come into play such as consciousness, perception, cognition, realisation and our emotional senses of apprehension, anxiety, optimism, appreciation and dislike – and many more besides. We may be persuaded, not only by the convincing arguments of others, but our own too, unwittingly or otherwise.

An assertion is that the acquisition of knowledge is affected by what we might term the human condition. Information only becomes knowledge when it is assimilated – to a greater or lesser extent as a precursor to understanding and reasoning.

What affects understanding?

- ▶ Surface or shallow learning as distinct from deep learning
- ▶ Involving the breadth and extent of knowledge
- ▶ And depth of knowledge too
- ▶ At what point do we understand or think we do?
- ▶ Or is it a case of not misunderstanding but how do we progress from there?

Reasoning

The word may be viewed as both as a verb and a noun. As a noun it implies a cause, an explanation or justification of an action or event. As a verb it is about thinking, the process of understanding and an ability to form viewpoints logically. Reason or reasoning implies weighing up, analysing, critically examining, possibly comparing, making sense and forming what we may term a value judgement that is, put another way, our own take on something. But is our reasoning sound and how do we know?

A catchphrase of entertainer Max Boyce was I was there! We might have been or not. As Bertrand Russell said we either gained our knowledge by observation or by acquaintance. We may have been there at the time, or otherwise directly associated with the event or occurrence, or had been acquainted with the 'facts' as described by others. It is helpful to explore these points in the context of reasoning, how we form a view and the basis of this.

Reasoning by Observation

- What did we see?
- What else was going on?
- Did any events precede this?
- Did others follow?
- What was the context?
- Did we see what we wanted to?
- Does prejudice come into play?
- Was our observation relative to other situations?
- Or/and our previous experiences?
- Was our understanding reliable?
- Could we justify our reasoning to others?
- Are we convinced enough to testify?

Reasoning by Acquaintance

- Who informed us and why?
- What form was this in?
- How reliable was their version of events?
- Is this consistent with those of others?
- What body language was employed in the telling?
- Is there any so-called evidence to justify their stance?
- What makes us convinced or otherwise?

Ten constraints to reasoning

1. Limited scope of material presented – gaps, exclusions and omissions
2. Interposing fact with conjecture or falsehoods – the illusion of truth
3. Shifting sands – manipulation, ambiguity, confusion, masking etc
4. Don't confuse me with the facts – obfuscation, concealment, distortion etc.
5. Robustness of analysis – evidence, significance, completeness etc
6. Vague assurances and platitudes – polished and persuasive arguments
7. Our interpretation – accurate, false, skewed, incomplete etc
8. Zig-zagging – jumping about, making false connections, obscuring etc
9. Our emotional resilience - reluctance to question and challenge perhaps
10. Seduced by the presentation style – the example of the Ken Dodd tax trial

The importance of reasoning

- ▶ Helping us to question and seek clarification
- ▶ Applying our values to the subject content eg ethics and morals
- ▶ Seeking to find meaning that is acceptable or otherwise
- ▶ Providing a basis for the determination of truth

A few final thoughts

Interpretation and perception are useful tools and so is imagination but they may not be rooted necessarily in a rational or logical approach to our reasoning. This did not worry George Bernard Shaw who scoffed at a formal process. Need it matter to us?

Hard wired it seems is our desire for certainty, yet how can we be so sure or certain? Are we in possession of all we require and how can we know? Might there be an inbuilt element of incompleteness as in life itself? As Karl Popper said we have to allow for the notion of falsification in accepting perceived wisdom, until and unless it is altered by a revelation that may reject, alter or augment the original validation.

Reference Sources

The Story of Philosophy – Bryan McGhee

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Thinking from A-Z Nigel Warburton

50 Philosophy Ideas – Ben Dupré

The Philosopher's Toolkit – Julian Baggini & Peter S. Fosl

Tools from the Education Philosophy toolbox, especially how we learn