

Evaluating strengths and weaknesses of reason as a way of knowing

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This paper that I am writing on is a piece of paper; that is undeniable fact. Hundreds of years of development and definition also back up this statement as do any scientific experiments carried out upon it in an effort to prove that this piece of paper is indeed a piece of paper. Yet through reasoning the fact that this is a piece of paper can be disputed and even proved wrong. Reason seems like an excellent way to work out the world around us. It uses all of the facts available to come up with a suitable hypothesis which can be tested and either proved or disproved through experimentation. This is the foundation of science, which is what the majority of people would trust. So anything proved through scientific means is therefore an irrefutable fact. Of course, in every experiment write up there is an acknowledgement that the data collected might not be completely accurate or that the interpretation of results might be wayward but again this is perfectly reasonable. It is reasonable to assume that despite your best efforts you may have got the answer wrong and another answer, no matter how unlikely, may be correct. As well as reason being proved by scientific experiment it can also be proved by historical fact. For example, it is undisputable fact that on 30th May 1431 Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. That cannot be argued with, it was that date and will always be that date no matter what happens in the future and every history text or website would agree with that fact. So it is therefore illogical to start claiming that Joan of Arc died last week as historical facts, which are perfectly reasonable, tell us otherwise. However, does reason really help us in our quest for knowledge or is it a poor way of finding out about the world? Despite much scientific investigation and historical knowledge there are many questions in the world that are left unanswered

and unexplained. These questions are sometimes fundamental to life itself. For example, how are we conscious beings that can interact with the world beyond purely animal instincts? This question could possibly be explained by the electrical impulses in the brain that form our thoughts but how can we have developed into any kind society purely through electrical impulses? In this case, using reason to explain what is happening almost seems unreasonable as the potential answer seems not to be able to completely cover the question. After all, if it is only electrical impulses, then what need is there for a person to be able to be able to create a symphony with an orchestra? As well as reason not being able to answer some questions there are some problems with following logical arguments. Logical fallacies are the main example of this. This is where through looking at two or more facts a conclusion is drawn which is false. For example: Cake is food, food is tasty, and therefore cake is tasty. However, this is obviously not true as whilst some cake may be tasty, perhaps even the majority; this does not mean to say that all cake is tasty. After all a burnt cake is not that tasty! Also not only is the conclusion false the two facts through which the conclusion is derived can also be said to be false. After all, any cake that I bake should not be classed as food and not all food is tasty. This statement is far too general and is a large problem with logical fallacies as they generally come to a wrong conclusion, both through the ignorance of other factors as well as the fact that often the facts are not completely accurate in the first place. Lateral thinking is also something which at first seems illogical yet (often) in hindsight becomes logical. It is creative thinking which does not merely follow the most logical steps to reach an answer. For example a suggested

solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East was to ship vast amounts of Marmite to the area. This seems utterly senseless, as surely holding talks and making agreements between the two sides would be the best steps forward. However, on examining the idea further it becomes logical, if creative! In the typical diet of people in the Middle Eastern area there is a lack of zinc due to the main diet of unleavened bread. This lack of zinc creates aggression. Marmite contains a lot of zinc and therefore could be used to solve the problem in the Middle East. Whilst this solution does not seem reasonable it would work and so shows that reason is not always the best policy. There is also a difference in opinion between what people may think is logical and illogical. Many people in the world take illogical decisions and believe illogical knowledge. Or they seem to do so. Religion is a major factor in many people's lives and it affects many of the things that they think and do. Due to this people may make a decision that seems illogical to secular people which is perfectly logical to religious people. This brings up the question of; what is reason? After all if two different decisions about the same thing are made and are both reasonable to those people it begs the question of whether or not reason itself can be defined. Is reason just a matter of opinion or is there a yardstick by which all reasonable decisions can be made. If we look back at the British Empire one of the purposes of that was to; " Make the world England" rather than to respect what other cultures thought and did. In many small islands in the Far East a warrior culture was common and often tribes would fight each other for prestige rather than for anything else. However, to the British this seemed barbaric, yet without it the culture fell apart. For them it was reasonable for this to

take place, the knowledge they had seemed to point to the fact that this was a good thing. But not for the British who had a very different opinion through the knowledge that they had acquired. To conclude reason as a way of knowing has both strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses are that a difference of opinion means that people will reason differently too making it an irregular method of making decisions and acquiring knowledge. Reason may also not be the best policy as more creative solutions may be better which can be derived through lateral thinking. Also logical fallacies call into question the validity of reason as they produce false results through logical steps. As well as this we cannot answer some fundamental questions through reason. However, reason is often the best way that we can make decisions in the world. Scientific experiment and historical knowledge are two very good examples of how reason cannot be changed and is therefore very valuable as it allows us to have consistency with our knowledge. Of course religion means that some inconsistency comes into play with our knowledge but on the whole reason is often the best policy.