

International Baccalaureate

Theory of Knowledge

EVALUATE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF REASON AS A WAY OF KNOWING

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3. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of reason as a way of knowing.

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Reason is paradoxical in that many of its characteristics are both strengths and weaknesses, depending on their application, which is itself both a strength and a weakness. I consider the very act of thinking to be the use of Reason, and so it is critical in defining us as knowers rather than us just as perceivers. However, inherent in reason and thus in thought are problems of knowledge, not least of which the musing that no conclusion of reason in isolation is certain. Thus we are condemned to having our own opinions, and the arguments pertaining to which is correct is where the colloquial definition of Reason is trapped. These superfluous uses of Reason often disguise its very nature, which is where its great strengths and fundamental weaknesses are found. Reason is convoluted and as such very persuasive; as long as nothing is lost in translation, but it can only be certain as far as we know and only useful if Language can convey its conclusions. Nevertheless, with a knowledge of how to take advantage of Reason's weaknesses, it is a very powerful way of knowing.

Thought is the process by which we know more than we can simply feel or perceive. It begins with the input of raw information, a sensory perception, a feeling or an idea conveyed by language. This information becomes something we know and is given meaning via a process of intermediate steps, wherein we make judgments, implications, inferences and generalizations. The final step is the conclusion that that information means something. We now *know* what that information means. This thought process is logical, and since logic is synonymous with Reason, so is thought. It follows then, that without Reason as a way of knowing, we cannot know anything but the raw information that we receive. If I saw a white Lilly and was unable to reason, I would only know that I was seeing that object; I couldn't name it or its colour and I wouldn't be able to make the generalization that Lillies are a white flower. I could, upon seeing the Lilly and smelling its perfume, find it pleasing or not, however I would not feel sad because I knew the symbolic connection between Lillies and death. This implies that Emotion can be both dependent and independent of Reason; I can either experience emotion or arrive at it as the conclusion of thought.

Inherent in thought are problems of knowledge due to the intermediate assumptions on which a conclusion is based. Many different assumptions can be made from the same raw information, which result in different people drawing different conclusions from the same piece of information. Opinions are these different conclusions and they can be equally logically valid, but all are prejudiced by individual bias. Just because they are logically valid does not, however, mean they are true, but opinions are an example of Reason's paradox; the ability to justify just about anything is Reason's strength, but this same characteristic generates its weakness, that no conclusion of reason in isolation is certain.

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For the same reason that I am not assessing my own essay, reason assessed by reason cannot be considered reliable. Attempting to determine whose opinion is indeed 'true' will again result in different opinions depending on who does the determining, so it cannot be relied upon to of itself provide a certainly true conclusion. However, this weakness can be avoided whilst utilizing Reason's strength if it is applied with consideration for the other ways and areas of knowing. If a conclusion is reached by the Australian government that logically it is in the best interests of Aboriginal children that they are taken from their families and placed in institutions, then before that conclusion can be considered true enough to act upon, the same conclusion must be reached ethically and morally; it must feel right. So too must the perception of the effects on children in similar circumstances concur, such as results from controlled studies. Once the government, having considered all the applicable ways of knowing, is convinced of its opinion, it must be communicated interpersonally to all involved, namely the parents of the children, and they must reach that same conclusion given their personal bias and cultural background. Only then should their reasonably-contrived opinion be considered reliable.

The problem with knowing via interpersonal concurrence is that the Reason we are trying to convey is not necessarily the Reason that the listener is reasoning from the language they are receiving. If you and I agree that epistemology is an intriguing subject, then we are assuming that we both have assumed the same conclusion as to what epistemology is, and that no information has been lost in communication between us. Evidently this problem is exacerbated across languages and cultures, hence the colloquialism 'lost in translation'. This facet of Reason is a weakness, and adds uncertainty to conclusions justified to be true through mass agreement. Does it follow, then, that Reason is also intrapersonally bound by Language?

Can we think without using language to do so? The only way of knowing that can conclude to this end is Reason, for asking such a question invokes thought, which is reasoning. One who knows a language finds Reason and Language inseparable and one who doesn't know a language would not be able to tell us if they could Reason because they would have no concept of reason and no means with which to communicate. Thus it can be reasonably assumed that one cannot think without language because all we can perceive us doing is thinking with language. Once again there is inherent uncertainty in this conclusion, for Reason is reasoning about Reason. If Reason is bound by language, then it implies that those with the greatest mastery of language are also the greatest thinkers, no other conditions considered. Furthermore, it allows for the possibility of one language allowing for higher, truer, reasoning than another language. Therefore, the strength of Reason is conditional upon the 'strength' of a particular language and the individual's mastery of that language. In this manner, the conditional strength of Reason is a weakness.

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Reason is a very convoluted way of knowing, which is again both a strength and a weakness. In order to be acceptably certain of a conclusion, every implication of every assumption and intermediate must be followed to its own conclusion and thoroughly tested to certify its certainty. The Natural Sciences aspire to this process, through the use of the scientific method, which result in them concluding very powerful and very reliable hypotheses, but sometimes the very conclusion that philosophers came to thousands of years earlier. For example, in the last century physicists have determined that time and space are intertwined and that at the beginning of the physical universe time also began, so the notion of what happened 'before' this beginning is nonsensical. This postulate has important implications in science which have changed the way we view the universe since its publication, but Augustine said the same thing almost 1500 years ago, yet his conclusion was not considered valid like the scientific one is.¹ This example demonstrates the persuasiveness of Reason, especially as employed in the scientific method; its conclusions can thoroughly stand the test of the perpetual why question, even if the conclusion is incorrect, and so convince knowers of its validity. Science is not the ultimate guide to universal truth however, for it employs Reason, a problematic way of knowing. To test the scientific conclusion against a different bias, other opinions, such as philosophical conjectures, drawn from other ways of knowing need to be considered.

In an attempt to best circumvent the weaknesses of Reason, its biased basis can be utilized as a strength. If every knower concurs on a supposition, then to the best of our knowledge as a collective race that conclusion is true, because all biases have been accounted for. Whether that knowledge is absolutely universally true is still uncertain, nonetheless, because we don't know what we don't know. For example, Newton's equations of motion were known to be universally true by the mathematical and scientific communities until Einstein showed that they are only approximations of broader equations that hold at low cosmic speeds². Currently these same communities know Einstein's equations to be true, but who is to say they are not just like Newton's, an approximation of even broader equations that we don't know we don't know?

Without Reason as a way of knowing, we cannot know anything but the raw information that we receive; with Reason as a way of knowing, we cannot know that anything is certain. Reason wielded by those unaware of its power and its ever present curse is dangerous, for assumptions are unknowingly juxtaposed as facts, and consequentially anything assumable can be misconstrued as fact. Without language, my evaluation of Reason would be meaningless to anyone but me and logically I would not have even been able to cogitate the concept in the first place. Conversely language has cursed Reason with a facet of misinterpretation which may have left you with a somewhat obtuse opinion of me. Reason's strengths and weaknesses are such as far as we know, but we also know, as far as we know, that there is a lot we don't know and don't know we don't know. So, as the conclusion to this reasonably assessed evaluation of Reason, no matter how persuasive and justified Reason is, its conclusions must be balanced by cross references with other ways and areas of knowing against different prejudices before it can be trusted.

¹ Davies, P. p81

² Hewitt, P. p232

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