Reasoning: All at Sea?

Peter Cave

We start with a familiar tale, the tale of an ass – as of a donkey, a mule – of Buridan’s. There’s no long, though also no more, the ass. Another has, another asp, another apocryphal creature of Jean Buridan, a fourteenth-century, logicalian, logician and philosopher. as is hungry, he finds himself between two bales of delicious hay. The bales are the same size, succulence, density. They are the same in every respect; they are equal distances and angles away from Ass – one is to the left, the other to the right.

“I am an ass of reasons,” boasts Ass. “I have reason to eat, but no good reason for preferring this side over that. Being right or left is irrelevant.” And when Ass is urged to eat both, he protests bitterly at the lack of good reasons to eat only one – first the one to the left, the other to the right.

So it is that Ass dies, dies of starvation. “Only an ass could be so asinine,” mused Spinoza three centuries later, as the tale introduces the hollowness of how reasons and causes relate.

Transpose the tale to rational and human beings: you are hungry; you have reasons to eat, but that reason is insufficient to explain why you eat the chocolate on the left and not the one on the right. No doubt, neurological changes caused invisible changes that caused you to decide go left, go right, other neurological changes accounted for your chocolate desires and urge to act now – but how do the reasons fit into this picture? Any reasons you announce, be they on explanation or justification, any words uttered, result from vocal chord movements, caused by neurological changes. Maybe our reasoning regarding our actions are beside the point, being, as one, epiphenomena, impotent narratives, running alongside biological causal chains – but...

We make valid inferences; we know, sometimes, depending on wine and company): “Look, you follow, ‘If all men are mortal and Ass is a man, it follows that Ass is mortal’? You expressed a logically necessary relationship, justifying your belief. Yet that expression – courtesy of the vocal chords again – is not upon causal neurological relationships as one understanding of what you said. Causes and effects are not in logically necessary relationships. Electrochemical changes do not know, so to speak, that one effect manifests a conclusive validity. Whereas, different effects, such as ‘Ass is therefore immortal’ would demonstrate bad reasoning.

Causal explanations fit only for actions of billiard balls.

We evaluate reasons, premises, evidence, being a good to bad for conclusions; we do not evaluate causes as good or bad for their effects. True, we build electronic circuits such that calculations and deductions churn out right answers, but those circuits have no idea of getting things right.

The hollowness extends to all meanings; because of neurological changes, vocal chords and tongue together lead to announcements by some reasonings. Rationally deny any moral obligation to help strangers suffering thousands of miles away, though we have obligations to rescue a child in distress, if before our very eyes.

That biological explanation does not thereby justify the beliefs. Causal explanations exist for all actions of billiard balls.

And so, the deep puzzle is: do our reasonings, our morality – indeed, what we mean by our words – rise above our biology?

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