

Reasoning: All at Sea?

Peter Cave

Peter Cave on good reasonings.

We start with a familiar tale, the tale of an ass – of a donkey, a mule – of Buridan’s Ass no less, though also no more. The ass, hereafter Ass, is the apocryphal creature of Jean Buridan, a fourteenth-century Parisian, logician and philosopher. Ass 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 – save one is to the left, the other to the right.

“I am an ass of reason,” brays Ass. “I have reason to eat, but no good reason for preferring this bale over that. Being right or left is irrelevant.” And when Ass is urged to eat both, he points bleakly to lack of good reason to eat one first rather than the other.

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

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

We make valid inferences (well, sometimes, depending on wine and company). “Look,” you say, “If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, it follows that Socrates is mortal.” You expressed a logically necessary relationship, justifying your belief, yet that expression – courtesy of the vocal chords again or (metaphorical) thought chords – rests upon causal neurological relationships as does our understanding of what you said. Causes and effects are not in logically necessary relationships. Electro-chemical changes do not know, so to speak, that one effect manifests a conclusion validly drawn, whereas different effects, such as “Socrates is therefore immortal”, would demonstrate bad arguing. Causal explanations for beliefs do not thereby justify the beliefs. Causal explanations exist for all manner of silly beliefs.

We evaluate reasons, premisses, evidence, as being good or 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 bafflement extends to all reasonings. Because of neurological events, vocal chords and typing fingers lead to announcements by some that we lack 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 that moral stance.

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

If, on the one hand, good reasonings are ‘nothing but’ biology, then the argument here, as with all philosophy (and mathematics and morality), is at the mercy of casual causal neurological connections; so, there would be little reason to trust it – and little reason to trust this conclusion that there is little reason to trust it. We are at sea. If, on the other hand, reasoning ‘rises above’ biology, then do we ascend into mystery? Remember, though, evolutionary explanations of vision and hence our sight of mountains do not show that mountains depend on our eyesight. Similarly, even if explanations exist for human recognition of good arguments and reasons, that is no proof that their goodness depends on human recognition. Neither mountains nor good arguments need be mysterious, if not reduced to evolved neurology.

None of this helps Ass. Even if good reasoning stands on its own, above biology, Ass and many of us are sometimes saying that we ‘cannot decide’ what to do, yet still we do. Pangs of hunger could finally stir Ass just when his focus happens to be on the left bale – and off he goes, left. Aspirations for truth stir philosophers; let us hope that what we happen upon is not determined solely by what we happen upon.

Further reading: Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (OUP, 1997)

Peter Cave lectures for The Open University and New York University (London); his latest book is The Big Think Book: Discover Philosophy Through 99 Perplexing Puzzles (Oneworld, 2015).

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