**Having Faith in Reason**

"Anyone who acts irrationally cannot become a disciple of Jesus. Faith and reason are necessary and complementary in the pursuit of truth. God created man with an innate vocation to the truth and he gave him reason for this purpose. Certainly, it is not irrationality but rather the yearning for truth which the Christian faith promotes. Each human being has to seek the truth and to choose it when he or she finds it, even at the risk of embracing sacrifices."

* Pope Benedict XVI

The English philosopher J. L. Austin once suggested that when faced with a distinction, one term of which seems clear and unproblematic and the other problematic and confused, it is a good idea to look at the supposedly clear disjunct again. That may be the thing to do in the case of the dispute over faith and reason, usually predicated on the assumption that these two notions are contraries. Most of the interest and concern is focused on the notion of faith and its meaning, whereas the notion of reason is thought to be clear and transparent. In fact, however, the notion of reason, as it is often opposed to faith, is typically used vaguely without any clear meaning at all or in some question-begging sense. So we need to ask “What is reason, exactly? What is its nature? What is its relation to faith?” and not simply assume that reason must be invariably and implacably opposed to faith.

Proponents of the claim that faith and reason are opposed say we should follow reason rather than faith. How exactly are we to do this? The most natural supposition would be that we rely on discursive reason, the sort of reasoning that takes the form of inference, by means of which we arrive at some further belief on the basis of other beliefs we already possess, as the source of our substantive beliefs rather than rely on any form of external authority. Let’s call anyone who believes that discursive reason so described is the sole source of truth and knowledge a *rationalist*. Generally, someone who holds this view also maintains that no belief is rational for us unless it can be justified by reasons, i.e. by discursive reasoning taking the form of a sound argument or a well-confirmed scientific explanation. In that case, one’s belief will be justified for oneself only if it is the conclusion of a successful argument or explanatory inference. Other beliefs, no matter how acquired, will be at best non-rational beliefs with no claim on our rational credence. To accept such beliefs will be epistemically irresponsible and thus willfully (i.e. intentionally and deliberately) *irrational*, directly contrary to one’s epistemic duty as rationalists understand it. Many (but perhaps not all) rationalists of this sort maintain that religious faith involves just this kind of irrationality, since believers claim that faith is a gift from God received on the basis of authority and that the certainty of faith is neither enhanced nor diminished by the presence or absence of rational proof. But is this true?

Whether it is or no will depend, in part, on whether the rationalist is correct in supposing that reason – here meaning discursive reason, the sort that involves inference from something already taken to be true to some further belief – is a self-sufficient source of justification for our beliefs. Any skeptic will tell you that it seems pretty obvious that it is not and will point to the famous “problem of the criterion” to show this. All discursive reasoning, we will be told, involves a chain of justification that is either non-terminating, circular, or terminates in something not capable of further discursive justification. In all such cases, says the skeptic, discursive reason fails to provide any justification for the beliefs it is enlisted to support. If the chain of justification never terminates, so that each inferential step depends for its justification on some prior step, which itself in turn requires some further step for its justification, and so on *ad infinitum*, we can never know whether the belief that we began from is justified or not. We can at best know that the belief is never justified at any finite step in the series, and since we cannot examine the whole series without examining each step *seriatim*, we will never be able to get to the end of the series and so determine whether or not is justified. On the other hand, if the justification our belief B turns out either to rely on B’s being true, or on the truth of some belief that presupposes the truth of B, then our justification will involve arguing in a circle, a well-known logical error. If, in the third case, our chain of justification terminates in something that cannot be further justified J, it seems that we can always raise the question “Why should I accept J?” Given that we have stipulated that J is not capable of further discursive justification, discursive reason can provide no answer to that question. In that case, given that a belief is justified only if it can be justified by some further belief or evidence, none of the beliefs in that series will possess or be capable of conferring justification on any further belief. In that case, none of our beliefs will be justified.[[1]](#footnote-1) Reason, then, does not appear to be capable of justifying itself and thus constituting the foundation for theoretical inquiry out of its own resources. At the same time, reason surely has some role to play in theoretical inquiry. The next topic, then, is to consider what that role might be.

II

Let us begin from a traditional conception of the human intellect as a rational appetite for being. Put less portentously, the human intellect, as expressed in spontaneous acts of attention to phenomena evoking wonder and exciting curiosity, naturally seeks the truth about the real expressible as propositional knowledge. Since this knowledge rarely lies ready to hand, discursive reason (*vernunft*) expressed in propositional inference is and has to be the primary tool employed by the intellect undertaking the task of theoretical inquiry that terminates in knowledge-acquisition and the kind of rational discourse expressing that knowledge. However, since discursive reasoning is not “autonomous” in the sense of being self-grounding, neither is it the only cognitive faculty relevant to or necessary for successful theoretical inquiry.

To begin with, inference as we find it occurring in the individual human mind is a pretty chancy affair. We all recognize that many, and in some areas perhaps most, acts of inference yield error rather than truth and that there is a need to distinguish good from bad reasoning – the realization of discursive reason in the individual human mind – through the discovery of the norms or principles of reasoning. The fact of error shows that these principles are not immanent in the concrete reasoning process itself. Our reason needs to be trained and to this end the norms for reasoning must be imported from without, from the faculty of rational intuition through which putatively self-evident, *a priori* truths are directly apprehended *as such* with intrinsic certainty. This faculty is the source of the principles of formal logic and mathematics, such as the calculus of probability, upon which the norms of deductive logic and probability theory are based. However, even the norms/principles of inductive or informal logic are still formal principles in the technical sense insofar as they prescind from the content of any particular argument.

At the same time, reasoning can be formally impeccable without leading to a substantively true conclusion. As such, more than this is needed for the discovery of substantive truth, in particular, substantively true premises and evidence which, as we have seen, discursive reasoning cannot itself supply. Thus, if we are ever to reach any but merely hypothetical conclusions, we must rely on our other cognitive (spontaneous belief-producing) faculties for those premises and that evidence. These other faculties, which ground substantive factual claims in immediate non-propositional awareness of things and states-of-affairs, include introspection, sense-perception, and memory. Unless these cognitive faculties are reliable in and of themselves, theoretical inquiry has no prospect of arriving at knowledge of any substantive truth. This result has a direct bearing on the question before us, because the question of whether such knowledge is possible is itself a substantive one, concerning a contingent state-of-affairs that cannot be decided purely on formal grounds.

For this reason, the skeptical attempt to undermine discursive reason by using discursive reasoning to undermine the reliability of our cognitive faculties is stillborn. Any instance of discursive reasoning must employ some sort of structured inference. To attack the reliability of the faculty of rational intuition from which the principles of structured inference are drawn will likewise call into question the very reasoning used to establish this conclusion. By undermining those principles insofar as they are the products of the operation of that faculty, we will be left with no basis upon which to assess the formal correctness of the reasoning used to establish that conclusion. We will thus be disbarred from affirming that conclusion on the proffered rational grounds.

This holds no less for skeptical attacks on introspection, memory, and sense-perception as sources of knowledge of their objects. Unless we are introspectively aware of the immediate contents of consciousness, we cannot even know what we are currently thinking or experiencing. Further, unless memory is reliable, our certainty about what we are currently thinking or experiencing must shrink to an infinitesimal “present” moment that is over before we can even focus our attention on it. At the same time, since every instance of discursive reasoning is temporally extended, every such instance must be mediated by memory. In that case, if that instance of discursive reasoning proposes to show that memory is not reliable, it once again undermines itself, since by the time we have reached that conclusion its premises will belong to the remembered past to which memory, according to the reasoning under discussion, gives us no reliable access.

At the same time, memory derives its substantive content from introspection and sense-perception and so depends on the reliability of those faculties as a condition of the reliability of its information, over and above its own reliability considered in itself. In this respect, memory has a secondary or subordinate status in relation to introspection and sense-perception since the reliability of its contents is in part dependent on, because derived from, the operation of those faculties. As such, any skeptical attack on introspection or the senses as a source of knowledge is likewise an attack on memory, with the same dire consequences we have already noted.

In general, any skeptical attack on the faculties of substantive knowledge must itself be drawn from substantive considerations: the *real possibility* of substantive knowledge concerns a matter of fact, and thus cannot be decided on purely formal grounds, any more than any other contingent, *a posteriori* claim can. The difficulty, however, is that these substantive considerations must themselves be derived from the very faculties that the skeptic hopes to use to call those faculties into question. This means that they will support the intended skeptical conclusions only to the extent that those faculties are reliable for us. Thus, if we want to draw skeptical conclusions from the fallibility of introspection, memory, or sense-perception, it has to be the case that we can successfully identify cases of, e.g. perceptual errors and the false beliefs formed on their basis. This, in turn, requires that these very faculties be capable of justifying these empirical claims, which will not be possible unless they are reliable so far forth. I cannot, e.g., appeal to the testimony of the senses in order to call the reliability of the senses into question without calling that testimony, which is its product, into question as well. On the other hand, if I can justifiably rely on the senses in order to establish the considerations to which the skeptic wishes to appeal, then those skeptical conclusions must be false. Once again, skepticism undermines itself when it attempts to present itself as a successful instance of theoretical inquiry.

The skeptic rightly insists that discursive reason cannot prove the reliability of our other cognitive faculties. This, however, is not due to any intrinsic “weakness” on its part. Rather, it merely reflects it nature as a secondary, dependent cognitive faculty subordinate to those other faculties, and thus incapable of doing the task that skeptics have assigned it as somehow necessary for our being justified in believing that our cognitive faculties are reliable. The skeptic is right to insist that reason cannot do this job but draws the wrong conclusion from this result. While it may be the case that reason cannot positively justify belief in the reliability of our cognitive faculties, neither can it provide any positive grounds for doubting their reliability or even calling them into question, since discursive reason is itself dependent on those faculties for its own reliability as a tool of theoretical inquiry. This is, after all, the very form of inquiry in which the skeptic is engaged when he or she proposes to expose the “pretensions” of reason with the intention of showing that there is nothing in it.

At the same time, make no mistake. That reason is incapable of calling itself and our other cognitive faculties into question does not show that either it or our other cognitive faculties are *in fact* reliable. Those “common sense” philosophers who, in the words of one eighteenth century critic of the Scottish school, “solve the problems of knowledge by repeating over and over again, “We know this! We know that!” overstate their case and run the risk of enshrining parochial prejudices as irrevisable, eternal truths. When Dr. Johnson refuted Berkeley by kicking a stone he evinced not common sense, but merely a narrow-minded distaste for the sort of theoretical inquiry that is the lifeblood of science and philosophy. It will not do merely to stubbornly insist that we know what we cannot justify.

It remains, then, that belief in the reliability of reason, and of the other cognitive faculties upon which it relies, is ultimately and literally a matter of faith, an assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Our cognitive faculties themselves reliably testify to the fact of their own fallibly, as the skeptic notes. Accordingly, This faith is precisely the belief that our cognitive faculties are both *truth-directed* (thus capable of leading us to knowledge of the real if properly used) and also *self-correcting*, so that our inculpable errors can in principle be detected and eliminated by a reapplication of the very faculties that produced the errors in the first place, just as we detect arithmetic errors by doing our sums over again or correct a distorted vision of things by taking a closer, better look. Faith of this sort has motives, but not cognitive grounds.

III

The belief that our cognitive faculties are truth-directed and self-correcting is a substantive, empirical claim, one that is therefore contingently true if true at all. Furthermore, it is one that we can neither confirm nor disconfirm by reference to any empirical evidence without invidious circularity. At the same time, however, our cognitive faith in the reliability of our cognitive faculties is not gratuitous or dispensable for us. That faith is both indispensably and ineluctably affirmed in every exercise of mind and expressed in every coherent thought and meaningful utterance - even the skeptic’s! Our nature as rational beings is too strong to be long detained by the skeptic’s sophisms, as even Hume admits, though not, as he avers, due merely to the influence of instinct, custom, and habit. Instead, our distinctively human form of consciousness is inconceivable apart from it, such that it belongs to our very essence as self-conscious subjects without which custom and habit cannot operate or influence us. It can be escaped only by a kind of solitary mutism that strives neither to think nor speak and in so doing to cease to be human at all. Pragmatically considered, there is no alternative to having faith in reason; it is irrefragable for us.

Nevertheless, we will not be entitled to that faith in every conceivable circumstance. Suppose someone believes that reason leads us to the view that our cognitive faculties are *solely* the product of some chance-governed process with no inherent tendency to produce them. In that case, the probability that those cognitive faculties are reliable (truth-directed and self-correcting) is going to be extremely low. Given this, it will be highly likely that my cognitive faculties are not reliable after all. Therefore, on the supposition that the belief that my cognitive faculties are solely the product of some chance-governed process is true my faith in reason will be defeated and undermined, and thus (for reasons we have seen) any rational motive that we might have for accepting that belief. In that case, the trust that rational faith compels us to place in our cognitive faculties is betrayed by the results of their actual employment, with the paradoxical result that we both ought to trust those faculties (since we can do no otherwise) and yet not trust them to the same extent (since they undermine themselves by leading us to affirm the claim that it is highly likely that they are unreliable.) In that case, what should we do?

One alternative is to bite the bullet, affirming that, despite the long odds, we have arrived at reliable cognitive faculties solely through the operation of some chance process. However, such a supposition, made in the teeth of the relevant evidence, seems willfully *irrational* in one loose, traditional sense of that term. Consider an analogy. If someone were to set a rowboat adrift from Providence, Rhode Island with the expectation that the random action of the wind and tides would carry it to Lisbon in two month time, we would point to the long odds against this outcome as strong evidence against its actually occurring. If that someone were to say, “Nevertheless, I have faith that it will happen,” we would undoubtedly dismiss that faith as irrational. Belief that we have reliable cognitive faculties as the product of some sort of chance process is equally improbable and thus equally irrational. Reason is one again defeated, and Hume would no doubt regard himself as vindicated.

Since we could never have a good reason for believing this in any case, the sensible alternative seems to be to reject the view that our cognitive faculties are solely the product of some chance process. In that case, Cartesian theism presents itself as a natural alternative. If our cognitive faculties have been designed by a benevolent, veracious God, then it is highly probable that we possess reliable cognitive faculties, faculties that when properly used will lead us to the truth. God is not a deceiver and so would not create me with cognitive faculties that, no matter how carefully I used them, would never lead me to the truth or make it impossible for me to discover and correct my inculpable errors. On this supposition, my faith in reason is well-placed and corresponds to our most natural interpretation of appearances.

Here faith and reason join hands: belief in the theistic God is both the natural complement to our faith in reason and seemingly necessary for the credibility of that faith, so much so that we can say that faith in reason naturally leads to faith in God. As such, faith and reason are not opposed and we need not choose between them. To paraphrase the Epistle of James, “You have reason, and I have faith, is that it? Show me your reason, and I will show you the faith that underlies that reason.”

1. Must we then despair of reason and embrace some form of *global* skepticism? No, and for two reasons. First, skepticism of this sort is self-refuting. The global skeptic proposes to use discursive reasoning to show that discursive reasoning is incapable of justifying the truth of any proposition. The skeptic can succeed in his aim only if discursive reason is capable of showing this. However, if the skeptic’s conclusion, (i.e. that reason is incapable of justifying the truth of any proposition) is true then it will lie beyond the power of reason to prove this as well, even in principle. On the other hand, suppose that does not lie beyond the power of reason to establish this result (i.e. that reason is incapable of justifying the truth of any proposition.) In that case, reason is capable of justifying at least one proposition, namely, the belief that reason is incapable of justifying the truth of any proposition. However, in that case, the skeptic’s supposition has to be false, and so contrary to hypothesis, discursive reason is not capable of establishing the skeptic’s conclusion.

   It is just as well. Rational discourse and theoretical inquiry concerning the possibility of human knowledge would be impossible if we were to seriously entertain the global skeptic’s point of view. Unless we can take the reliability of discursive reason for granted, we are in no position to evaluate any reasoning, including the skeptic’s arguments and evidence for his skeptical assertions. So then, if we are in a position to evaluate the skeptic’s argument and evidence, then the skeptic’s arguments must be fallacious, since if they are not fallacious and really do establish the conclusion that discursive reason is not a reliable cognitive faculty, we are not in a position to use discursive reason to evaluate them, even if they are sound. In neither case, then, can such arguments ever give us a good reason to embrace skepticism. It is therefore useless to entertain skeptical arguments in any case, except as a form of mental exercise. Discursive reason can never lead us to skepticism, to the rationally justified belief that there are no rationally justified beliefs. We *must* dismiss the global skeptic without a hearing, just as we must dismiss the supposition that we might be insane, not because we can prove the contrary but because such a supposition is self-stultifying and thus incapable of leading us to any substantive belief, even the belief in skepticism itself.

   The second reason is that we can escape the skeptic’s net simply by denying the rationalist’s dubious claim that no belief is a rational one unless it can be discursively justified by argument or evidence. Indeed, such a claim is clearly self-undermining. For suppose that I believe this claim is true. In that case, then in accordance with the content of that belief I will be justified in so doing only if I can justify that claim on the basis of a successful inference from premises or evidence. However, as we have just seen, such a claim cannot be justified on the basis of any premises or evidence without circularity. Thus, if I believe this proposition, then in accordance with the content of that belief, I am duty-bound not to believe it. Rationalism, then, refutes itself. At the same time, rejecting rationalism has no dire self-referential consequences, and so we ought to reject it in the interest of preserving some role for reason in the pursuit of truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)