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## "Reason" - Chapter 11 from Apologizing for God

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# 11



## Reason

ONE OF MY GRADUATE school professors in philosophy asked me where I thought I stood compared to other graduate students in our department. His particular question was about my intelligence. When I replied “in the middle: I’m not as smart as X and smarter than Y,” my professor thought I’d gotten it right. In some senses, being a “professional” philosopher can be extraordinarily hard on one’s self-esteem. We are trained, in fact, although perhaps not in so many words, to size up the other person’s argument (or intelligence!) and try to punch holes in it. We are trained to size up just how smart the other person is by trying to show that that person’s reasoning is faulty. Of course, there are no courses in “sizing up the intelligence of your interlocutor” but nevertheless, one does size them up on a regular basis. This puts reason in, I think, an unreasonable role. It also is bad for one’s soul.

Pascal asked the following penetrating question. “Why is it that the lame person does not annoy us when a lame mind does? It is because a lame person realizes that we walk straight, but a lame mind declares that it is we who are limping.”<sup>1</sup> Pascal rightly calls attention to what we think we have at stake in our reason. No challenge to our reason can go unchecked, for after all, it is *me* that is challenged when my reasoning is.

Reason is easily thought of as right thinking, and right thinking is, of course, what *I* do. If I believe the wall is white, then I believe “the wall is white” is a true statement. To believe is to be committed to the

1. Pascal, *Pensees*, 32.

truth of what one believes. To reason to a belief is to understand one's reason as pointing to the reasonableness of the belief and hence the truth of the belief. We thus treat *our* reasoning as something special, as privileged, as giving us the truth. So the beliefs I end up with, supposing I got those beliefs reasonably, are taken by me to be true. The minds of others, when disagreeing with mine, are lame. To lame minds, I take offense. What could be more natural, since, of course, my beliefs are true! The lame mind challenges me. Since I am right, the lame mind is wrong, and since the mind is lame, I am doubly insulted. It would be odd indeed to say I believe the wall is white and yet believe also that "the wall is white" is false.

What real connection is there amongst reason, belief, and truth? Surely not all my beliefs are true. Yet I would be taken as odd should I say that I believe some statement and yet take that very statement as false. My beliefs are *mine*—I like them, cherish them, and sometime might even die for them. Yet I know they are likely not all true. Whence reason, then? Reason gives me true beliefs. In reason I trust, and yet what is reason that I should so trust?

Reasons are arguments. An argument is a string of propositions, a special string of propositions. If I take the propositions in an argument to be true save the final one, I should take the final one to be true as well. Robert Nozick points out some important things about argument. When we mention that philosophers argue, the child often thinks that we yell at one another. The metaphors we use in referring to argument shed light upon this child-like observation. We philosophers are prone to say, "That's a knock down, drag out argument." Or "that argument is very powerful." Or perhaps we say that the argument was strong or overwhelming. Nozick suggests that perhaps what we need is an argument so strong that if the recipient doesn't believe its conclusion, powerful reverberations are set up in the brain so the recipient dies.<sup>2</sup> The implications of Nozick's not-so-subtle observation are protean.

How does the will play in here? Even if an argument threatens one's life, one can still resist its conclusions, sort of like when a thief threatens one with a gun and says "your money or your life." One can still refuse to give over one's money. Refusing the thief's request might be foolish, but the will is a powerful thing. Yet the will is not the only thing that can influence one's reason. Pascal writes: "If you put the world's great-

2. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 4, 5.

est philosopher on a plank wider than he needs, but with a precipice beneath, however strongly his reason may convince him of his safety, his imagination will prevail. Many would be unable to contemplate the idea without going pale and sweating.”<sup>3</sup> Fear can overrule one’s reason. Similarly, so can love and passions of all types. Reason cannot, in fact, be thought of in fullness without recourse to the emotions. Reason always comes attached.

No embarrassment should attend this discovery. Philosophers from Plato and Aristotle on down through history tried to shed reason of its emotional cousins. Yet the cousins can’t be divorced from the family. Plato, for as much as he wants to ban poetry from the republic, himself is such a poetic writer that one can be moved to laughter and tears by his descriptions. Aristotle, whose Unmoved Mover is nothing but pure thought, can’t deny that the dramatic arts involve the catharsis of the passions. One’s emotions put one in touch with aspects of reality that pure reason can not. One is not easily motivated by pure argument alone to help the needy. Better to have felt their pain. Moral development occurs in the context of both intellectual and emotional response.

So will and emotion attend reason, and reason therefore is not the only source of knowledge. Reason has limits. Pascal locates these limits in our state. We are both glorious and wretched. “A human being is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. To crush him, the whole universe does not have to arm itself. A mist, a drop of water, is enough to kill him. But if the universe were to crush the reed, the man would be nobler than his killer, since he knows that he is dying, and that the universe has the advantage over him.”<sup>4</sup> We are stretched out between the infinite and nothing, always grasping after truth, but never finding certainty. Reason can only give us so much.

The lame mind returns again to assault us. This time, however, the lame mind is our own. We must, in confronting the lame mind, understand the limits of our own reason. “Man’s greatness lies in his capacity to recognize his wretchedness.”<sup>5</sup> So reason requires of us humility. Pascal writes: “It is unfair that anyone should be devoted to me, although it can happen with pleasure, and freely. I should mislead those in whom I quickened this feeling, because I am no one’s ultimate end, and cannot

3. Pascal, *Pensees*, 17.

4. *Ibid.*, 72, 73.

5. *Ibid.*, 36.

satisfy them. Am I not near death? So the object of their attachment will die. Therefore just as I should be guilty if I caused a falsehood to be believed, however gently persuasive I had been and however pleasurably it had been believed, giving me pleasure too, in the same way I am guilty if I make myself loved and if I attract people to become devoted to me.<sup>6</sup>

My importance as human being has limits. I slouch toward non-being. Encouraging devotion to me is encouraging a misplacement of affection. Pascal relates the encouragement of devotion to oneself to the guilt of arguing falsehood. No matter how gently I persuade, and no matter how happy false belief makes my interlocutor, falseness is destructive. So is the encouragement.

The lame mind reminds me, by mirror reflection, of myself. I'm accused of my fallibility, and recognize by the very emotional response I have to its accusations, that I have a humble estate. Whether I also have a humble response is up to me. Humility cannot be separated from reason. Whether reason responds to its humble estate affects my judgment about my reason. Reason thus brings us to the edge of emotion and emotion brings us face to face with the limits of reason. Reason opens us to possibilities other than itself. It leads us to the foot of truth, but it cannot scale the mountain for us.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.