

Michael P. Lynch

In Praise of Reason.

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I enjoyed this book very much, even though (or perhaps precisely because) it was written against those who, like myself, are skeptical about the epistemic and/or practical value of reason. Lynch's aim is "to defend both the value of giving reasons in public discourse and the value of certain principles over others—in particular, the principles that constitute a scientific approach to the world" (x), which are the principles upon which those reasons are based. Although he deals at length with epistemological issues, Lynch's chief concern is for the negative political consequences of adopting a disparaging attitude towards reason. He insists on how crucial the practice of giving and asking for reasons is to the viability of a democratic society. As we will see, herein lies the key to his answer to skepticism about reason.

In Chapter 1, Lynch identifies three sources for the skeptical worries about reason: (i) the view that all reasoning is in the end a process of rationalization and that it is our emotions and intuitions, and not reason, that play a causal role in our lives (Chapter 2), (ii) the view that we cannot offer noncircular reasons for our trust in reason, the discussion of this view constituting the bulk of the book (Chapters 3 to 5), and (iii) the view that reason operates under the false pretense that it can reveal the objective truth, a concept that, though perhaps useful, is illusory (Chapter 6). (It would have been helpful if Lynch had explained somewhere the general structure of the book.) The problem with skepticism about reason is that it "undermines a key principle of a civil society: that we owe our fellow citizens explanations for what we do" (2). In Lynch's view, "the best we can say on behalf of reason—indeed, what we should say—is that it plays a central role in any healthy public culture" (5). If we do not agree on our basic epistemic principles, we will not be able to determine what is rational to believe because we will not be able to determine what is a reliable source of information or a reliable method of inquiry. This in turn entails that we will not agree on the facts. For even though in a democratic society we can resolve disagreements by voting, this is not possible in the case of all disagreements, including the one about which fundamental epistemic principles we should endorse.

I would only remark that, *pace* Lynch, I do not think that any of the above sources for skepticism about reason explain why many ordinary people dismiss scientific evidence or find it unpersuasive, since such views are found almost exclusively among academics. In the case of ordinary people, the kind of sociological and psychological explanations Lynch briefly considers and leaves aside seem to me to hit the nail on the head. Most commonly, scientific views disrupt the consolation or peace of mind many people find in religious, metaphysical, and superstitious beliefs.

Chapter 2 examines the relation between reason, on the one hand, and emotion and intuition, on the other. Lynch rejects both the view that humans should be dispassionate reasoners and the view that their actions are ruled, not by reason, but by their emotions and

intuitions, which are immune to rational assessment. In actual fact, reason is intimately intertwined with both emotion and intuition.

In Chapter 3, Lynch claims that the skeptical challenge posed by the Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus (who, by the way, was not an ancient *Roman* writer, contrary to Lynch's characterization) does not concern unreflective or animal knowledge, but our ability to defend our beliefs publicly by means of objective reasons. The skeptical argument against the value of reason purports to show that the disagreements about fundamental epistemic principles are unresolvable because such principles cannot, when challenged, be defended by means of noncircular reasons that can be appreciated from a "common point of view". Consequently, our fundamental epistemic principles are incommensurable.

Let me just point out that Sextus would not happily admit that we have animal knowledge. First, he suspends judgment about any claim about the real nature of things or what is objectively the case. And second, he would point out that the very concept of unreflective or animal knowledge is theory-laden and would insist on the fierce and unresolved disagreement on the topic between internalists and externalists.

In Chapter 4, Lynch considers two answers to the skeptical problem laid out in Chapter 3. The first is that, when justification comes to a halt because we cannot provide noncircular reasons for our basic epistemic principles, what takes over is tradition. The problem with this view is that "it encourages the disturbing and deeply illiberal thought that our traditional practices are beyond external criticism" (61). For there is no rational way to prefer a given tradition over any other, and any radical change of one's mind is never a rational process, but the result of manipulation or coercion. The second answer is that there are certain principles we cannot help taking for granted because they are hardwired into us. This by itself, however, does not entail that such principles are true, and even if it does, it does not constitute a reason we can offer in defense of those principles.

Lynch's own answer to the skeptical problem is laid out in Chapter 5. The fact that we cannot provide *epistemic* reasons for our fundamental epistemic principles when these are challenged does not mean that we cannot offer *practical* (i.e., moral and political) reasons for them. Lynch proposes a Rawlsian argument according to which we should be committed to those principles "that persons concerned to advance their interests would endorse in a position of epistemic and social equality" (96). We have to imagine a game ("the method game") in which the players have to decide on which fundamental epistemic principles should be privileged on an imaginary planet of which they will be the inhabitants. The players ignore both what social position they will occupy and which epistemic principles will be true on that planet. Thus, in making their decision, they cannot appeal to reasons based upon epistemic principles they believe to be true in the actual world. Lynch claims that, insofar as the players know that the inhabitants of the imaginary planet will be humans and that this world will look like the actual one, they will first choose the epistemic principles that humans cannot but trust, no matter whether or not the methods recommended by such principles (such as observation and logical inference) will be reliable on the imaginary planet. And second, at least most people will choose epistemic principles that it is in their self-interest to favor. These principles are not ones that favor exclusively the socially privileged, but rather are open in that they generate reasons that are

public, i.e., evaluable from a common point of view. More precisely, public reasons are intersubjective, transparent, repeatable, and adaptable, which are the features that characterize, together with observation and logical inference, scientific practice. The method game thus allows us to identify reasons for the naturalness and practical rationality of endorsing the epistemic principles that underlie scientific reason.

I am not sure that Lynch's answer to the skeptical argument proves that skepticism about reason is mistaken. For that argument purports to show that one cannot provide noncircular *epistemic*, not *pragmatic*, reasons for one's fundamental epistemic principles when these are challenged. It is therefore not clear that Lynch has come up with a non-question-begging way of resolving deep epistemic disagreements. Even though his way is not manipulative or coercive but rational, it is pragmatically, not epistemically, so. By playing the method game, one chooses certain epistemic principles not because one has settled the dispute about whether the methods they recommend are reliable, but because such principles are those that are pragmatically justified from the point of view of our self-interest. The skeptic might say that he and Lynch are talking past each other. In addition, a skeptic like Sextus would not deny that one can come up with pragmatic reasons for preferring certain rules or policies over others, which nevertheless implies no doxastic commitment to their truth or correctness. But Sextus would also make it clear that what the Pyrrhonist's aims underlying such pragmatic reasons express are not beliefs about what is objectively and universally good or valuable, but mere preferences that appear to be shaped by circumstantial factors.

Lynch himself acknowledges the objection that his method game only provides practical reasons. His rejoinder is that these reasons nonetheless have epistemic consequences (114–118). For by being committed to an epistemic principle, one halts for the time being any further inquiry into its truth and treats the method recommended by that principle as reliable for forming beliefs. Hence, if the method game establishes that it is rational to commit to a given fundamental epistemic principle, then it establishes also that it is rational to employ the method of belief-formation recommended by that principle and to hold the beliefs produced by this method. I confess that I do not see why the method game ultimately results in doxastic commitment to certain basic epistemic principles when the only reasons being offered to the skeptic who challenges those very principles are pragmatic, i.e., when one cannot provide sufficient or conclusive evidence in their support. Why not rather think of non-doxastic acceptance?

Finally, Chapter 6 addresses the third source for skepticism about reason, namely, that the notion of objective truth is nothing but a chimera. Lynch, arguing that the humanities and the sciences diverge not only as to the methods used to get at the truth but also as to the kinds of truth aimed at, rejects the view that truth has either a single nature or no nature at all. He defends pluralism about truth, since this notion "is a functional notion, and truths are what they are because they play a particular role" (129). Correspondence with the facts is only one property that plays the truth-role, another is concordance. A belief is concordant when it is both supercoherent (it coheres with other members of a belief-system at any stage of inquiry) and compatible with external facts.

This book is graced with a readable and occasionally witty style, clever arguments, and a line of reasoning that succeeds in being clear and accessible to the non-specialist despite the complexity of the questions tackled. Some of these questions could have been discussed more deeply, without impairing accessibility. Also, certain views are not always fairly or accurately represented.

Let me conclude by saying that even though I do not share Lynch's strong faith in reason, I respect the vehemence and cleverness with which he defends it against skepticism.

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