

Menachem Fisch and Yitzhak Benbaji

The View from Within: Normativity and the Limits of Self-Criticism.

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 2011.

408 pages

\$50.00 (paper ISBN 978-0-268-02904-3)

The View from Within seeks not only to understand the character of knowledge acquisition and change in scientific views, but also to re-assert the intuition that reasoned discourse, which is dominated by communal languages, norms, practices, and theories, nevertheless has ample room for creative movement to revise those outlooks. In this wide-ranging study, Fisch and Benbaji examine the character of reason and the ability of an individual knower to distance herself effectively from the normative framework in which she functions in order to be self-critical and innovative. Fisch and Benbaji frame their critique in dialogue with the recent writings of leading contemporary philosophers in a detailed analysis of the character of reason, the problem of relativism, and how to comprehend scientific change more generally. Firmly placed within the context of current debate, the authors provide a thorough evaluation of recent arguments as well as offering an important critique of normative reason in scientific discourse.

Fisch and Benbaji, like others concerned with understanding objectivity and the acquisition of scientific knowledge within the larger context of conceptualizing rationality, have had to consider scientific reason challenged by constructivist formulations and postmodern attacks. Of the many ways of addressing this issue, let us consider two kinds of reason in dialectical interplay—*discursive* and *social*. The social level of communal exchange, criticism, and consensus is here coupled to the discursive problem of how normative commitments might be altered in the setting of scientific change driven by innovative findings, anomalies, and external challenges. Fisch and Benbaji consider the most deliberative character of reason, and how normative commitments might be altered by reasoned argument to generate epistemological insecurity and re-assessment. In this sense, they are internalist “defenders” of reason. Accordingly, discursive reason is formulated within a long philosophical tradition in which rationality and advancement of science owe far less to a confident reliance on data, methods, and warrants than to the self-doubting Socratic “dialectic of interrogation” to which facts and theories are regularly subjected. Incapable (as a matter of logic) of objectively confirming her efforts, let alone of *proving* them, the scientist can, in principle, boast no more than to have prudently subjected her work to the most thorough tests available. That knowledge is ever incomplete, and that it must be scrutinized through the lens of skepticism, remains the key precept of critical investigation of all kinds. This epistemology serves science as it did philosophy from its earliest awakening, namely, boldly facing complacent assumptions and beliefs.

Attempting to define the conditions by which reason operates, the authors pit Kant’s autonomy of reason against the post-Kuhnian varieties of pragmatism that acknowledge the impossibility of insular reason to achieve its ostensible goals. Finding irresolvable problems at each end of the spectrum, Fisch and Benbaji have presented a portrayal of scientific change through a critique of rationality as the normative vehicle of scientific discourse and how change occurs within the constraints imposed by language. (Note, this focus is upon the individual

scientist, not the collective.) They confront Rorty, and by affiliation all those who have argued the impossibility of finding a critical “Archimedean point” for assessing language or the reality, which may be described by rational methods. As an “ironist” (one who knowingly functions in full awareness of the normative constraints on his rationality), Rorty assumed a radical relativism and argued that scientific change accordingly arises through blind experimentation, new vocabularies and metaphors. According to Fisch and Benbaji this process of tinkering, whose utility is only appreciated retrospectively, leaves the ironist unable to appraise critically and then to proceed under assumed rules of rationality. He thereby forfeits the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational. Fisch and Benbaji want to save normative rationality, and while they do not enlist the “outside of the framework” position, they still resist Rorty’s relativism and skepticism and, more specifically, the *ad hoc* randomness of Rorty’s notion of scientific change.

So how does such rational self-questioning function and upon what might it be based given the normative strictures in which we think? No short summary of a highly nuanced and astute reading of the “reason problem” does justice to the complex argument presented here. Fisch and Benbaji have actually combined two separate discussions into one, and they have drawn from diverse philosophical voices to make their point. Their argument couples two positions: 1) “Comparative irrationalism” accepts that no normative property shared by conflicting normative outlooks exists that allows their ranking, and 2) just because such comparisons cannot utterly discredit one outlook over the other, *still*, internal self-criticism allows for evaluation and change. Note, they assert normative reason’s self criticism within a relativist framework. Their position is therefore necessarily based on *intra*-subjective, not inter-personal criticism, and in this regard they separate themselves from other more communally-based arguments most prominently associated with Brandom, Waltzer, and MacDowell. The authors find themselves attracted to Frankfurt’s picture of the self-reflective self, but they are disturbed by the absence of an integration of the inter-personal, interpretive elements of critical discourse. And well might they be, inasmuch as the entire question of the agent’s free will, a metaphysical position underlying their own venture, is left undefined. Despite the open-ended nature of that inquiry (one that they cannot be fairly held to account), Fisch and Benbaji have combined the positions labeled #1 and #2 above and have settled on an “ambivalently” generated disturbance from without to spur intra-subjective criticism. On their view, imaginative self-criticism offers an effective range of reason to examine itself despite the strictures on reason that they have so carefully identified.

I doubt, however, that their prescription for the disequilibrium offered by intra-subjective scrutiny suffices, and so I take a more sympathetic view towards the inter-subjective than they allow. But this is fair disagreement and arises from my closer adherence to the pragmatist position. Pragmatists have argued that rationality becomes a category of action, a means to expose and solve problems, and thus offers a method by which inquiry might gauge its success or failure as determined by a broader set of goals and standards. This instrumental quality of rationality breaks the strictures of language by enlarging the inquiry’s frame of reference. The individual problem is set in a context that itself has an orientation conferred by larger issues, which then direct the more local investigation. By standing outside the immediate framework, with recurrent reference to local strictures, a critical position may putatively be obtained.

Sociologically-informed pragmatists cite the fluidity of interactions between scientific communities and the ever-present opportunism of practicing scientists to enlarge their critical purchase on their investigations, where “reason” must be understood as active dialogue *between* actors. These actors revise their thinking in response to these opportunities and different kinds of knowledge. So on this stage, the character of modern inter-disciplinary science has radically changed the older monolithic, formalistic accounts of scientific practice, and with these new scientific structures, new ways of describing rational thinking have become apparent. So following this general bearing, Fisch and Benbaji cautiously adopt the heuristic of an orienting function of a “meta-framework” as proposed by Friedman, coupled to Galison’s notion of the “trading zone,” in which more fluid dynamics might lend themselves to the initial destabilization offered by external scientists and various social forces. On this view, a broader perspective appears to guide the scientist in her more local inquiries in which a perspectival advantage cannot be obtained.

This approach has appeal, however, the psychological mechanisms, or even the parameters for drawing such a conclusion, are not provided. Confined to an abstract philosophical discussion, the claims made find little support beyond the conjured arguments already rehearsed without the benefit of empirical studies. The question deserves a wider arena.

Most would concede that reason does allow for breaking the strictures of common thinking. That is not the issue, for evolution of ideas and knowledge *do* occur. The question is how? The weakness of this book, and for that matter, one shared by all of the distinguished philosophers participating in these discussions, reduces to the paucity, actually an absence, of psychological data, cognitive science research studies, insights derived from sociological research, or examination of historical examples with detailed case studies. (While mentioning historical cases, Fisch and Benbaji make scant use of them.) Consequently, the philosophical discussions remain more abstract (and weaker) than they might otherwise be. For example, I am repeatedly amazed at such statements made by Fisch and Benbaji as “...left to their own devices, people are simply incapable of the kind of normative self-criticism we seek to articulate... It matters little, it would seem, whether or not a person is exposed to the normative critique of others” (275). They provide no evidence that this central claim is *true*, and unfortunately their entire discussion, as well as those whom they engage, rests upon unfounded assertions that may correspond to how they regard their own reasoning processes. However, those descriptions hardly reflect empirical support of any sort.

“Reason” has been so rarified in this literature that these discussions only exist in a universe of general assumptions about *reason in practice*. If they counter that theirs is solely a philosophical study, not psychological, I would assert that any, and all, philosophies of science ultimately rely on the sciences that underlie them. The description of reason is no exception, and while one may claim that philosophy has its own demands and purposes, I still think it fair to place that philosophy in its most informed context. Simply put, philosophy does not stand alone, and especially in this book, where the authors situate their philosophical analysis within the real-life sphere of scientific thinking, the self-imposed restrictions cramp their argument. So, despite the philosophical elegance and the wide scope of their critique, I remain unsatisfied. A lack of historical evidence coupled to an absence of any psychological and sociological data to support their positions weakens any claims about how humans *actually* think. Empirical

evidence would lend credibility to the claims made here.

Perhaps my resistance is not a fair criticism of this work, inasmuch as Fisch and Benbaji are working within a tradition with its own standards and methods. Indeed, they have deliberately set their own project firmly within the established literatures. That I find them wanting is to ask for a different kind of book. Reviewers do that all too frequently, and I lamely admit to having fallen into that cantankerous group. Yet *someone* must at least point to historical and/or psychological case studies, which support or reject the positions espoused by philosophers. Why not explicate empirical evidence that would support the philosophy and strengthen the discussion? This general complaint thus is less directed to the work reviewed here than it is leveled against a current fashion of philosophizing.

In conclusion, after scrutinizing this well-done scholarly assessment of a central problem in contemporary epistemology, the central question nevertheless remains: given the pull from relativism and the uncertainties of how to understand creative imagination, where outside the pragmatic position does the self-critical position reside and how does it, in fact, work? That basic quandary remains the challenge even after exhaustive philosophical discussion, and while I have outlined the weakness of ignoring empirical research in this area, perhaps the uncertainty is, indeed, the message. I am not suggesting that psychologists or cognitive scientists have ‘solved’ the problem of normative reasoning and interactive rationality, but until a more informed dialogue develops between philosophers and their scientific colleagues, works like *The View from Within* will suffer from the weaknesses I have cited. In the meantime, philosophers are offering historians and psychologists a philosophical base from which they might pursue their own tasks, and, in addition, perhaps providing a better understanding of what we still require to comprehend human reasoning and creativity.

Alfred I. Tauber
Boston University