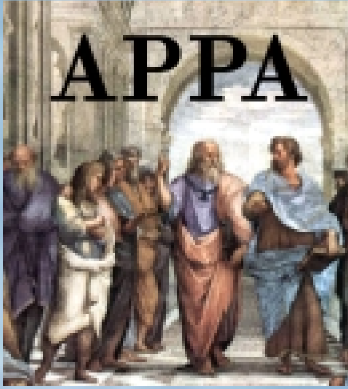

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Nemo Veritatem Regit
Nobody Governs Truth

Book Review

Michael P. Lynch, *In Praise of Reason*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2012, hardcover. ISBN 978-0-262-01722-0. 166 pages.

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Why does reason matter, if—as many people seem to think—in the end everything comes down to blind faith or gut instinct? Why not just go with what you believe even if it contradicts the evidence? Why bother with rational explanation when name-calling, manipulation, and force are so much more effective in our current cultural and political landscape?

Can we give objective reasons for our most basic standards of reason (our fundamental epistemic principles)? Or is there reason for skepticism? Lynch argues, against several forms of skepticism about reason, that we can, but that the reasons we can give for epistemic principles are ultimately practical, not epistemic. Appeals to scientific principles of rationality are part of the essential common currency of any civil democratic society: we owe our fellow citizens explanations for what we do based on epistemic principles that tell us mainly what is rational to believe and what sources of information to trust. He means by "reason" the ability to explain and justify our beliefs and commitments and, in a narrower sense, the use of logical inference (both "deductive" and "inductive") and "observation" from perceptual experience (p. 3).

Lynch's book, subtly argued and passionately written, is interesting and its relevance to philosophical practice is high. The communicative style is rigorous without jargon, clear and concise. And Lynch endorses the idea that all individuals share a common currency of reason with our fellow human beings. Hence he argues that the process of giving and asking for reasons matters, independently of what it may happen to get us.

The last decade has seen skepticism debated with renewed vigor: skepticism both presents a foil against which positive epistemic theses may be modified and tested, and offers powerful arguments that perhaps even lead to the conclusion that it correctly captures our ultimate epistemic condition. Skepticism about the practical value of reason has emerged even within the scientific academy. Many philosophers and psychologists claim that the reasons we give for our most deeply held views are often little more than "rationalizations" of our prior convictions, or that reason operates under the false pretense to reveal the objective truth. Or they claim—as did some early Greek philosophers—that we cannot give reasons for our trust in reason without running in circles because reasons are always "relative:" dictated by our culture or dependent on the vagaries of our individual psychologies.

The problem of the value of reason (ratio) is one of the oldest philosophical problems within the Western philosophical tradition, and skeptical approaches are a great challenge to the importance of reasoning and the practice of exchanging reasons. The aim of Lynch's book is to defend both the value of giving reasons in public discourse and the value of certain principles over others—in particular those that constitute a scientific approach to the world. His thinking on these subjects has many influences: among others John Dewey (1910; 1916; 1929;1938), Charles Sanders Peirce (1867-1893; 1893-1913), and

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William James (1890; 1907), as well as the more recent work of Ernest Sosa on reflective knowledge (2009) and William Alston on epistemic circularity (1986; 1993).

How do we rationally defend our most fundamental epistemic principles? Lynch, who distinguishes among several sources of skepticism, focuses mainly on a subtle one: the belief that we can't give reasons for our trust in reason without running in circles. Every one of our beliefs is produced by some method or source, be it humble (like memory) or complex (like technologically assisted science). If a method is challenged, it's not possible appeal to the same method to show that it is reliable. That would be circular. And appealing to another method won't help either, for unless that method can be shown to be reliable, using it to determine the reliability of the first method answers nothing. So a non-skeptical discussant ends up either continuing on in the same vein, pointlessly citing reasons for methods and methods for reasons forever (i.e., arguing in circles), or granting that the method is groundless.

In other words, as Robert Nozick (1981) pointed out, you think you are seeing these words, but could you not be hallucinating or dreaming or having your brain stimulated to give you the experience of seeing these marks on paper although no such thing is before you? More extremely, could you not be floating in a tank while super-psychologists stimulate your brain electrochemically to produce exactly the same experiences as you are now having, or even to produce the whole sequence of experiences you have had in your lifetime thus far? If one of these other things was happening, your experience would be exactly the same as it now is. So how can you know none of them is happening? Yet if you do not know these possibilities don't hold, how can you know you are reading these pages now? If you do not know you haven't always been floating in the tank at the mercy of the psychologists, how can you know anything: what your name is, who your parents were, where you come from, etc.?

So, if you are trying to be a not (so) skeptical person, no matter which way you go it seems you must admit you can give no reason for trusting your methods, and hence no reason to defend your most fundamental epistemic principles. This skeptical argument is disturbing because it seems to suggest that, in the end, all "rational" explanations end up being grounded on something arbitrary. But the thought that everything is arbitrary undermines a key principle of a civil society, because democracies are set up to allow for mutual deliberation involving the exchange of "public reasons" which are recognized by standards other than your own.

But among Lynch's main points there is a deeper idea that points to a possible solution: we need to justify our epistemic principles from a common point of view because we need shared epistemic principles in order to even have a common point of view, a shared background of standards against which to measure what counts as a reliable source of information, or a reliable method of enquiry. Put simply, as Lynch writes,we need an epistemic common currency because we often have to decide jointly, and without a vote or other polling system, what to do in the face of disagreement. Even if, as the skeptic says, we can't defend the truth of our principles without circularity, we might still be able, as Lynch argues, to show that some are better than others. Observation and experiment, for example, aren't just good because they are reliable means to the truth. They are valuable because almost everyone can appeal to them. They have roots in our natural instincts, as David Hume (1739-1740; 1748) might have said. Direct epistemic reasons are reasons to believe, writes Lynch, that something is true; and this is "just the sort of reason Hume says we lack for our first principles" (p. 74). So, Hume and the skeptics are right that we have to trust those sources without evidence. Than we have to take something for granted. Our "natural instincts" make us trust certain methods of belief whether we can give evidence for their reliability or not (p. 82).

The real problem is whether we can give reasons for our first principles, regardless of whether we take them to be matters of common sense. So appealing to our natural instincts isn't going to get us out of this problem, though it is a step in the appropriate direction (p. 78). The same goes with tradition: it alone can't be our answer to skepticism about reason. As Lynch underlines tradition (both with a "progressive" approach à la Richard Rorty (1979;1989), or following more "conservative" approaches such as that of Michael Oakeshott (1962; 1975)) cannot be a better route to objective knowledge (see espeically p. 67 and p. 70).

To take a rational approach for dealing with our first principles, "we should commit ourselves to a particular attitude of open inquiry" (p. 82), being aware that commitment is distinct from belief. One can commit to a principle without believing it is true, as do scientists who commit to a theory, and so rely on it in subsequent reasoning, while remaining agnostic about its ultimate veracity. Notice that this sort of commitment is not available to a skeptic, that is, to someone who always and only questions and who never commits.

Such an approach comes for instance from William Kingdon Clifford (1877) who held that it is wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence and yet, in so doing, showed that committing ourselves to this principle foces us to take something fundamental for granted. In the process of using "logical inference" and "observation," we become aware that we must trust some fundamental epistemic principles (namely those that are constitutive of scientific practice) even though we are not able to demonstrate that they are reliable without employing them. Yet we are nonethtless able to justify those epistemic principles as giving "practical" (and "public") reasons by showing how important these principles are for a functioning civil society (p. 84).

While skeptical worries are serious and in many ways understandable, they can be answered. As Lynch emphasizes: "Reason matters and appeals to reasons matter" (p. 3). His point is that defending some of our epistemic principles, "our faith in reason," is required by some of our other principles (p. 8). Similar points have been made by John Rawls (1996) and Jürgen Habermas (1981) as they were dealing with the key components of a functioning liberal democracy, and by Karl Raimund Popper (1945; 1972), Friedrich August von Hayek (1982), Hans Albert (1968; 1978) and John Watkins (1984) who were working from the different perspective of critical rationalism.

The concept of reason Lynch is deploying is "marked with frailty, fed by our sentiments and passions" (p. 10). From this point of view reason is a mix of limited rationality and rationalization; of true and false intuitions, inductions, syllogisms and paralogisms; of ways of saying and doing things, personal opinions and shared beliefs; and of being in a relationship with reality that is necessarily indirect, selective, and above all metaphorical as it is mediated linguistically and conceptually. These ideas are supported by the evidence that even on a preverbal level, abstraction is a characteristic of the categories our minds need to work (Gaston Bachelard: 1927, 1972; Michael Polanyi: 1974; Edgar Morin: 2008; Barbara Bertagni & Fernando Salvetti: 2010).

The point is not only that our reason is limited. It is also that we are mainly not dispassionate reasoners, and it would be very bad for us if we were. As Antonio Damasio (1994; 1999) has argued with his somatic marker hypothesis, feelings are internal guides that allow us to connect ourselves in various ways with the circumstances in which we find ourselves (this is "social cognition") and hence to make decisions. So, feelings and emotional responses themselves can be reasons—often they are bad reasons—despite the Platonic and Stoic conception of human psychology in which reason is the adult, while emotion is the child,

and despite the Humean picture in which emotion is on the top and reason is on the bottom, such that passion is always what that causes us to act.

Unless the Humean vision is significantly qualified, Lynch argues that it is very implausible. If to reason is to engage in justification, then there can be unjustified and justified emotions—as well as intuitions, because like emotions they too are not separate from or independent of reason. Emotions and intuitions can be "rationally evaluated" and judged as coherent or incoherent with our other beliefs and intuitions (p. 31).

This is why scientific education "clearly matters so much to the development of a healthy democracy: it has played a historical role in identifying prejudice and bias" (p. 38), and science itself presupposes values such as truth, objectivity, and what Lynch calls epistemic principles that tell us what is rational or right to believe (though within sophisticated frameworks it is rare for the data to be such that there is just one conclusion we can draw, because usually the data admit more than one interpretation).

When it comes to our most fundamental epistemic principles, "giving evidence for them is impossible without circularity." Nonetheless, "we'll believe them anyway" (p. 88). We will believe despite the awareness of such a circularity because these principles contribute to generating "public" reasons, assessable from an inter-subjective and diachronic point of view, within a self-correcting and group enterprise that is also relatively open and transparent. Moreover, scientific methods are also highly repeatable and the methods commonly used are adaptable and applied ideally to any problem.

Lynch writes also that methods like observation, deduction and induction come naturally to humans (p. 93). I am not so sure about that, being personally very close to the epistemology of Karl Popper and its criticism of psychologism and induction. So, in my opinion, a more direct analysis of Popper's critical rationalism by Lynch could have be of some interest. For instance, a discussion of Popperian fallibilism and the method of critical discussion which is also very coherent withing an open and democratic society, might have clarified Lynch's own views.

Nonetheless, Lynch's book is highly recommended. It is an interesting attempt to take seriously the "fact" and the "value" of pluralism (at various levels: social, political, scientific) within the framework of a democratic society, where "the fundamental principles of reason (mainly coming from scientific rationality) are less like the foundation of a building and more like the keystone of an arch" (p. 138). Without the keystone, the arch collapses; so other stones must also be in place. But Lynch reminds us that we can't look to the keystone alone.

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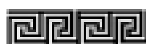

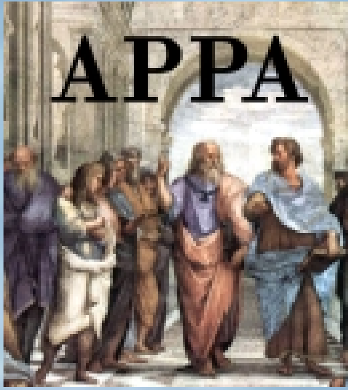

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Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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