

## The Value of the Life of Reason (20170525)

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I write this document primarily to try to get you, the reader, to adopt – a bit more strongly than you have – a devotion to fact and reason, and to promote that interest across the community as a whole.

Your life may depend on it.

Its importance seems obvious beyond question. We can illustrate it in countless examples. For an illustrative example, imagine that you are a prisoner presented with two glasses, each with a clear odorless liquid. One contains a poison that causes excruciating pain, while the other is good clean water.

It seems beyond question that you would want a way to determine which glass contains poison and which contains water. Towards that end, you discover that the poison is an oil that floats on water. You only need to take a drop from one glass and put it in the other. If that drop floats on the surface, then you should skim that drop off of the surface and drink the contents of that glass. If the drop sinks, then you should drink from the glass from which that drop came.

Having true and relevant beliefs can save you a lot of pain.

Now, let's introduce a number of prisoners. Each prisoner is presented with a glass of water and a glass of poison, and asked to choose which glass to give some other prisoner. In this community, you have reason to promote not only an aversion to causing others pain, but reason to promote an interest in true and relevant beliefs. , so that prisoners in general are choosing the glass with water rather than the glass with poison.

We live in a society where people are drinking a great deal of poison. This is happening because people are being careless about the truth and relevance of their beliefs. They are acquiring beliefs through unreliable sources, and failing to inquire into whether even the truth beliefs they have are relevant to their decisions regarding the glass from which others will be forced to drink.

This metaphor of drinking from a glass of poison stands for suffering from the results of carelessness with respect to the truth and relevance of beliefs. Those who will suffer the ill effects of greenhouse gas emissions, vaccinations (or the lack of vaccinations), a higher minimum wage, homeopathy and other forms of crack medicine, or lured into smoking, are examples of people who have been made to drink from a glass of poison – often by people who are careless in determining the truth and relevance of those beliefs causing them to choose the glass containing the poison.

This is a moral failing worthy of condemnation. Those who are put at risk of drinking poison – let alone those who are forced to drink the poison that others choose – have good reason to condemn, in harsh terms, those who made that choice carelessly.

One of the reasons we are drinking a great deal of poison these days is due to a common misunderstanding of the claim, “everybody has a right to their beliefs.” The popular misunderstanding is that it is wrong to condemn people for a careless belief that the glass they choose for others to drink from contains water. If it ends up containing poison, rather than to condemn the person who made the

choice for carelessness, we are told, “everybody has a right to their belief” – and we may not legitimately condemn the person who carelessly acquired the belief that the glass contained water.

We are also drinking a lot of poison because of beliefs grounded on faith. Some of the prisoners are making their decisions based on a passage in religious scripture that says, “Always choose the glass on the right.” In fact, the glass on the right, as often as not, contains poison. The people who wrote those scriptures long ago knew nothing about the “poison floats on water test.” Now that it is known, people with a slavish devotion to scripture are still choosing the glass on the right, and thus serving their fellow prisoners poison. *If your scripture tells you to always choose the glass on the right then, as long as you are choosing for yourself, that’s fine. But, when you are choosing for others, you may be obligated to use a different standard.*

Scripture is only one source of potential error. There are those who choose what glass others will drink from based on horoscopes or other signs, or think that they can choose the right glass based on intuition or some other special faculty whereby, if they close their eyes and point, they will point to the glass of water rather than poison. Repeated failures in these tests do not dissuade them. There are those who carelessly believe that they can tell the poison from the water because the poison has a slight reddish color that they can see, but which exists only in their imagination. Yet, they confidently assert that they are incapable of error, and that their methods for determining truth are flawless.

We see that people are also prone to fads – adopting a set of popular beliefs the way they may adopt a style of music or of clothing. “Crystal power” and the idea that GMOs and nuclear power pose a significant fact, and seeing terrorism as a greater threat than diabetes or drunk drivers, are trendy beliefs not founded on scripture. Yet, people embracing these trends still “choose poison” for other people to drink, and cause misery as a result.

We also need to consider the poison vendors – those who manufacture and sell the poison being used in the test. They obtain a profit when they can convince prisoners to choose poison instead of water. Consequently, they have reason to flood the prison with misinformation – telling them such things as that water floats on oil or, at least, that the “oil floating on water hypothesis” is “just a theory” and there are a great many reasons to doubt it. Because of these campaigns, they bank billions of dollars, and many more prisoners end up in agony.

We must also consider the prison employees – often paid off by the poison vendors, or under the influence of scripture – who encourage prisoners to select poison over water.

As a result of these customs, people are drinking a lot of metaphorical poison.

People will make mistakes – that goes without saying. However, much of the poison being served is not due to the innocent mistakes of people who are, nonetheless, doing the best they can. Much of this is due to carelessness, and some of it is due to malevolence.

The solution is to say that truth and reason matter – and to hold in deserving contempt those who carelessly or malevolently come to believe, or to choose, to have their fellow prisoners drink poison instead of water.

## Specifications

Having given this pragmatic defense of reason, I want to say a few words about what reason is, and about what reason is not. What is it that has the power to help us to obtain such benefits and avoid such harms? And what is it not?

Primarily, reason is concerned with the relationships between means and ends, not with ends themselves. In other words, reason is a tool for selecting the best way to reach a goal, it does not select the goal. The sentiments (desires) select our goals – and do so without any help from reason.

The question of ends falls within the realms of psychology and biology – with evolution providing a significant influence. One of our ends is to avoid physical pain – an end that we acquired through evolution, not through the application of reason. Our desires for sex and for food, the environments which we find to be comfortable, our interest in the well-being of our offspring and in the offspring of others, are to be explained in the first instance by appeal to the way that evolution has selected for a certain brain structure – a structure that contains a disposition to pursue these ends.

Once the ends are provided, reason comes onto the scene to determine the best means to those ends. Nature provides us with an aversion to pain. Reason tells us what to do and what to avoid in order to prevent ourselves from experiencing pain. Nature gives us an interest in the welfare of our children – or, most of us. Reason gives us important advice concerning what to do to take care of our children, if we would only listen.

There is an important – but too often overlooked – corollary to this idea. Reason has nothing to say about the value of ends as ends. However, reason has a great deal to say about the value of ends as means.

Evolution has not carved all of our desires in stone. It has given us a malleable or a plastic brain such that experience, in addition to genes, influences its structure. We can learn to like certain things and dislike others. This allows us to adapt to different climates. We learn to like or dislike what nature teaches us to like or dislike to fit into each environment – including the communities (environments) that we create.

Given this capacity to learn, it makes sense for us to ask, “What sentiments should we have, and which should we avoid?” Does it make sense to have a desire to smoke – or should one avoid having this desire (e.g., by not smoking to begin with, which is the proximate cause of the desire in those who acquire it)?

Since our interactions with our environment influence the desires we have, and since each of us is a part of the environment for those with which we interact, we also have reason to ask, “What desires should we give others?”

For example, our aversions to pain give us reason to cause others with which we have interaction to have aversions to doing those things that could result in our being in pain. Our interest in the truth provide us with reason to give others an aversion to lying. The usefulness of the tools we make and other pieces of property give us reason to cause in others an aversion to taking our property without our consent.

This, I would argue, is the foundation of morality. But that is a subject for a different discussion. At this point, my concern is with the relationship between rationality, means, and ends.

I have said that rationality is concerned with means and not ends. However, this implies that reason often has something to say with the value of certain ends – the desire to smoke, the aversion to lying or breaking promises or theft, and the like – insofar as we can influence them and, at the same time, insofar as they serve as means to the realization of other ends. We cannot say that having a desire to smoke is bad in itself, but we can say that it tends to thwart other desires. Those other desires provide the reasons to avoid having a desire to smoke, or to rid oneself of the desire once it is acquired.

When I write about reason, I am writing about selecting the appropriate means to ends. I am also writing about the selection of ends insofar as they are, at the same time, malleable and useful as means. I am not writing about the selection of ends as ends.

The focus of this paper is substantially about the selection of ends as means – and a specific set of ends in particular. It is concerned with using our power as members of each other's environment to promote, as an end, a love of reason and a contempt for sophistry. It is about causing people to want to get reason right, and to be embarrassed at being caught committing a formal fallacy as they would be at being caught in an act of theft or a deliberate lie.

### An Example

I am actually writing this paper in response to a couple of incidents I encountered among a group of people who claim to be interested in reason and progress. The question of abortion came up.

In this discussion, some people posted moral arguments that I found to be invalid. That is to say, they were examples in which a person was choosing which glass of water to hand to others – which policy to adopt for the whole population – without taking the proper care to determine if their beliefs were true or relevant.

In one case, an individual claimed that abortions were going to happen whether they were legal or not. He argued that we should therefore make abortion legal, so that it remains safe. In doing this, we can "save lives".

If we break this argument into its parts, it states, "If people are going to do X anyway, then X should be legal." However, we can also apply this to child molestation, rape, vandalism, and any other sort of crime. At this point in our history, we have not been able to find a way to make the claim "people are going to do X anyway" false. If this is a reason to make it legal, then we should legalize child molestation, rape, vandalism, and other crimes. At least if they were legal, people would not have to take desperate actions to avoid getting caught, and the victims will be safe at least in that regard.

By means of this *reductio ad absurdum*, I meant to show that the inference from "people are going to do X anyway" to "X should be legal" is invalid. The premise, even if true, is not relevant. Basing one's opinion on the legitimacy involves violating the moral principle of seeking a foundation for one's belief – choosing the glass of water that others will drink – on beliefs that are true and relevant.

Against this, those who defended the person who posted the original argument claimed that I had committed an error in using as my examples actions that were clearly wrong and deserved to be condemned. However, this defense simply begs the question. They are assuming that abortion has the property of not harming an innocent person – that it is legitimate – in an argument that is supposed to be showing that abortion is legitimate.

This is similar to handing the other prisoner a glass to drink from and saying, "I know that this contains water because I believe that it contains water." Again, this is a violation of the moral command to make certain that one's beliefs about what is in the glass are true and relevant.

I was also accused in this discussion of being "pro-life". Actually, this is not the case. My view on abortion – roughly stated - is that the fetus has no moral rights until about week 24. To have rights, a being must have interests. To have interests, one must have desires. To have desires, one must have a functioning brain. A fetus does not require a properly functioning brain until about week 24. Up to that point, the fetus is mere tissue and the woman may do with that tissue what she pleases.

However, while I believe that abortions are morally permissible, grounding policy on beliefs that are either false or irrelevant is immoral. Consequently, I criticize arguments, even if the person offering them support conclusions and policies that I also recommend, if they violate the principle of true and relevant beliefs.

In that abortion argument, some mention should be made about the claim that legal abortion "saves lives." Clearly, there can be no better example of begging the question – assuming in the premises that the fetus being aborted has no "life" in the relevant sense to be saved.

Among a group that claimed to be devoted to reason and progress, it seems that one can be condemned for pointing out that some of its members were violating the moral requirement to ground their policies on true and relevant beliefs.

Reason is concerned here with relevance.

There are many true beliefs that our prisoner can have. Few, if any, are relevant to the question of which glass contains poison Zane which contains water. Speaking more generally, are relevant to matching means to ends. Some truths may be relevant to some ends, but not others.

Obtain will help you to determine which is which.

and have written that true beliefs are important – because they help us to get what we want. I then argued that reason is important because it helps us to acquire true beliefs that help is to get what we want.

True beliefs are useful for the fulfillment of our desires.

Return to my example of the thirsty individual with two glasses to choose from, each filled with a colorless, odorless liquid. A true belief is crucial in realizing a state in which her thirst has been quenched, and in avoiding a state in which she is writhing on the floor in excruciating pain.

A desire to be reasonable represents itself as a concern concern Even though reason is concerned with the selection of means, and ends as means, but not ends as ends, it is extremely important.

Many people who argue in defense of reason make the false claim that reason alone can determine the value of certain ends or goals. They dictate this or that goal, and provide an argument suggesting that reason alone recommends it. Ayn Rand argued that reason demands selfishness. Immanuel Kant says that reason demand acting on certain categorical imperatives.

So, let's do more of it.

Before I get into discussing how to do this, there are a few more things to say about "Why reason?"

One fact to note is that reason concerns the relationship between means and ends. There is no rationality of ends. For thousands of years philosophers have been telling us that reason alone can tell us that "This is a proper end," or "That is a proper end." Here, I will say that this is nonsense. If you have an end (e.g., freedom from pain), reason will help you to avoid pain. However, reason does not select the avoidance of pain as an end. In the case (and many other ends), biology does this.

There have been a great many philosophies that have reported that reason alone dictates the pursuit or avoidance of particular ends.

However, once we have an aversion to pain, reason can tell us how to avoid pain.

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Already, I assume that some are taken this to be a way of saying, "What I want is for all of you to agree with me, because I know about all that is true and good in the world. If you do not agree with me, then it must be due to your deviation from the standard of truth and reason. If you embraced truth and reason, you will see that I am right in all things, and you will do what I think will bring value and happiness to all."

However, this would not be an accurate interpretation of what I am calling for.

A devotion to reason is a devotion to method, more than a devotion to any particular conclusion. One does not embrace reason by agreeing with me on any matter. One embraces reason by putting their beliefs – whatever they may be - on a solid foundation.

In part, this concerns the question, "Does the reason that a person holds a position matters, or does it only matter that he gets the right answer?"

Imagine somebody saying, for example, "Of course I believe that climate change is real. Scripture says that the world – or, at least, human civilization – will end in fire. Here we are facing a climate that is

getting increasingly warmer. Scripture is the source of all truth. What we see in the world is prophecy coming true."

I am assuming that the reader accepts the scientific consensus on climate change. Under that assumption, I want to ask:

Does it matter that this person has reached the same conclusion for the wrong reasons, or does it just matter that this person has reached the correct conclusion?

How should one react to this person? Should one react by saying, "Well, yes, climate change is happening, but your reasons for believing in it are all wrong. We can't go basing policy on somebody's idea of prophecy. It not only matters that you get the right answer on an issue such as climate change, but that your belief is properly grounded."

This came to light recently in an online discussion on abortion. When a poster asked people to give their opinions on abortion, there were two arguments in defense of legal abortion that I found objectionable.

The first said that abortion is permissible because people are going to do it anyway. Because people are going to seek abortions no matter what, we should make it safe and legal. Otherwise, we risk creating a dangerous situation with back-alley abortions that put womens' lives in danger.

I understood the argument to take one of two forms.

One form of the argument states, "If people are going to do X anyway, then X should be legal. People are going to seek abortions anyway. Therefore, abortion should be legal."

I substituted a simple disproof by counter-example. Substituting 'rape' in place of 'abortion', one gets the following: "If people are going to do X anyway, then X should be legal. People are going to commit rape anyway. Therefore, rape should be legal."

The same argument can be given. By making rape legal, one can regulate it in other ways in terms of health and safety. We can help to ensure that, when a rape does occur, that it occurs in a way that causes the least harm and suffering to the person who is committing the rape."

This argument in the case of rape represents an absurdity. It is supposed to. It is a disproof by counter-example.

In logic, an argument of this type has certain requirements. The purpose of this type of argument is to show that the original argument is invalid. This means that it is possible for the premises to be true, and the conclusion to be false. Because the premises do not guarantee the conclusion, the person cannot hold the