

## 2. When reason looks in the mirror

*Nothing stands above reason.*

The short proposition “Nothing stands above reason” (P) is one which has aspects and consequences stretching from one end of the horizon to the other. This attempt at discussing it will only be one of a myriad of possible approaches.

If the P is to have any meaning to us as thinking human beings, it has to have consequences for either our lives or our thoughts. It has to be a claim which we, whether through action or thought, have to take into consideration. In what respect does nothing stand above reason? Which project is best advanced through the means of reason? In which choices should reason be the ultimate guide?

P needs to be specified further before it can be discussed. First off: What exactly is meant by the word “reason”? As I am not aware of any definite answers to this question accepted by the philosophers and scientists of the world, I am not myself going to adopt any definition, but leave it to the individual reader to relate it to hers or his personal experience, hopefully bringing to mind quite universal experiences.

In this essay, I will discuss P as a proposition regarding our search for (ultimate) truth(s) or the denial of certain truth as a possibility. I will look at reasons for believing P to be true, as well as a few problems arising from P. The question I need to answer, thus, looks like this: Should human beings, when searching for truth always prefer the thoughts originating from reason to all other potentially relevant thoughts as a basis of judgement?

Immediately, the problem arises that I, as a person thinking about this question, does not stand above it in some philosophical space making objective arguments, but argue through the means of reason, based on my experience. When looking at the world, the sunlight is of great help in making the details of my environment visible to me. When I want to look at the sun itself, the sunlight is the greatest hindrance. Using reason, I can discuss a wide range of problems. When discussing reason, reason becomes a questionable tool. How should I think about it? This, the apriori choice of method, precisely the choice about which P, for all problems, makes a claim, is precisely here perhaps its greatest weakness lies.

One of the main characteristics of reason, is that it generates doubt. Any proposition should have a logical grounding before one should start believing it. If P is true, then nothing should stand above our doubt towards it, as it is reason which is causing the doubt. In other words: If we accept P, we acknowledge that we have no reason to do so (and therefore an obligation not to do it) until, through the means of P, we have shown that it is unreasonable to doubt it. For any argument for P to be accepted under the guidelines set up by P, it has to rely upon reason, thus it is circular. A priori, the acceptance of P seems to have the character of choice, rather than the acceptance of a logical necessity.

Could P be proven, a posteriori? This depends upon what P does to our relation with the world. Under P, which view of the world, which metaphysical position should one adapt? Global scepticism? Reason stands above our perceptions, reason tells us to doubt them, and therefore we are left with nothing but doubt? In that case, P has been proven to be inherently unfounded, also a posteriori, as there exists no certain external world by which the a priori doubt towards P could have been declared unreasonable.

One could argue that whether or not there is an external world, reason “works” in the world we perceive as real. Through the increase in happiness the aid of reason gives us, it has justified its position above all other ways of thinking. This position is not in accordance with P, however, as reason is no longer in a supreme position, but is serving an even greater good: Happiness. The individual is no longer searching for truth, the position of reason is not a necessary one, but a pact of convenience, and could be revoked without hindering the individual if the situation were to change.

A third possible outcome would be that one finds it meaningless to doubt the existence of the external world, and claims that the way in which this world adheres to the laws of logic means that the value of reason is proven. This alternative, in which reason enters a posteriori, not a priori, is perhaps the one which is best suited to withstand the doubt of reason. The belief in reason would have to be based on induction, though, and would thus be in the realm of probabilities, not absolute certainties (Yet, it could perfectly well be reasonable).

As one can see, P is far from self-evident. In fact, it is hard to find situations in which the individual would, when P is measured against its own requirements, have any reasons to

accept it. Thus, as a moral imperative (which it clearly has the characteristics of), P is marked by hypocrisy. The answer to the question asked earlier in the essay thus seems to be: No. We *can* trust reason above all emotions and beliefs, but it is far from evident that we *should* do so, at least not always. Accepting reason as supreme ruler in the land of thoughts is a choice, not a realisation.