Topic 1

Seemingly, reason is our most reliable way of knowing. In this essay, reason will be interpreted to be synonymous with logic and all its methods for developing self-explanatory axioms into sometimes counter-intuitive conclusions. As the application of reason follows strict rules regardless of the applicator, it seems to be impartial and therefore a strong foundation on which to establish conclusions from a set of claims. Reason is used to produce knowledge in different disciplines by way of derivation from established facts. However, reason can be considered equally powerful in destroying that knowledge. The question we are ultimately asking here is the following: does knowledge derived with reason contain in itself flaws not in spite but because of the use of reason?

A claim made in the citation is that reason is only useful in raising doubts and does not produce knowledge that cannot be refuted by the very same reason. I think there are certainly examples of such situations. Let us consider the moral theory of utilitarianism. We assume here that all intelligent sentient beings are emotionally capable of experiencing happiness and that the experience of happiness is a universal desire that should always be maximized. Therefore, simplistically stated, the actions that produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people are preferred. At first glance, this sounds like a sensible idea. However, we may go back and raise several questions about this theory. It may not be true that every human being has the same capacity for emotion. For example, in the brains of patients with psychopathic tendencies, there are often weaker emotional responses to physical and psychological stimuli compared to normal people. That implies that we can create a spectrum of worth based on capacity for emotion. Nevertheless, how can such capacities be quantified and furthermore, is it fair to create a spectrum at all? The abovementioned patients had no choice in the matter of emotional capacity and may have desires different from the rest of the population. The use of reason has led us into a confusing situation.

Furthermore, consider a hypothetical situation in which a certain amount of pain has to be inflicted on a group of people. We have the choice between two groups of people. The first group is relatively happy and is undergoing little suffering. The second group is relatively unhappy and is undergoing more suffering. If we inflict the pain on the happy first group, their change in circumstances will be large and dramatic. Alternatively, if we inflict pain on the second group, their change in circumstances will be less noticeable since they are already suffering. By way of reasoning, we can argue both ways. Therefore, reason has created a perplexing paradox for us that can only be answered by way of considering which arguments are more compelling – which is again a difficult task to undertake since “compellingness” cannot truly be quantified. Hence, I would say that often when reason is used to establish knowledge, in this instance a moral theory, reason may then also be used to raise doubts and unravel that very knowledge.

On the other hand, I would also say that the previously stated conclusion is not always true. Let us consider another example, but this time a simple deduction. Assume the following two statements to be true. The first statement: All humans are in the solar system. The second statement: I am a human. The conclusion: I am in the solar system. Here, we used reason to derive a conclusion from two stated facts. Even though this is a very simple deduction, the use of reason only provides us with more knowledge than we started with. The conclusion cannot be doubted with the use of reason since we are only saying that the conclusion is true *given* the original statements, or premises, are true. Reason is acting as a modest but powerful and lucid tool within our arsenal of ways of gaining knowledge. Therefore, reason does not *always* contain in itself the destruction of the knowledge it has derived. Taking such an example further, within the discipline of mathematics, reason acts in a similar way. Mathematics is not unconditionally true, but rather only true given the axioms it is based upon are true. Of course, there are also many instances of paradoxes in mathematics. An implied assumption in the citation seems to be that the existence of doubts is negative, but I would say that doubts within mathematics, doubts may be stimulating to the mathematical community rather than damaging. This is because mathematics is usually quantifiable and so reason can be applied to mathematical statements with less vagueness than reason being applied to ethical theories. I think that within mathematics, reason is a modest pawn in our game of acquiring knowledge because it does not declare knowledge but meekly states it.

In conclusion, I would say that the extent of quantification within a discipline directly relates to how well reason can be applied to “unravel” the knowledge previously acquired. When dealing with the real world and all its vagueness and ambiguity, reason may very well serve to be perplexing and complicated rather than helpful. However, as soon as we deal with knowledge that is quantified, lucid and less ambiguous, we come closer to a situation in which reason is a tool of creation rather than of destruction. Therefore, I would say that knowledge derived with reason does not always contain in itself flaws not in spite but because of the use of reason.