
Review

Reasoning: A social picture

Anthony Simon Laden

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Reasoning: A Social Picture is both an articulation of a particular idea (or picture as Laden prefers) of reasoning as well as an exercise in that type of reasoning. Laden suggests in his evocative prologue that philosophers often make their case much as Mr Collins made his case for marriage to Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. Reasons are ‘marshaled’ and they ‘serve as foot soldiers whose job is to defeat opposition and defend the author’s position’. Both Mr Collins and much of contemporary philosophy fail to reason *with* their interlocutor. Their appeal is to an abstract standard of rationality and not to the rational creature with whom they are reasoning. Laden asks us to trade in adversarial and competitive metaphors when thinking about reasoning (winning the argument, demolishing the premise, conceding the point) and instead think in terms of personal relations (building bridges, making connections, sharing spaces). Beginning both with the cover design (a detail from Renoir’s *Le Dejeuner*, which sees a man listening intently but in a warm and unthreatening way to a woman) and the prologue, Laden invites us to keep the picture of two people proposing and planning a life together in our mind as he builds a rich and compelling picture of reasoning.

Part 1 of the book focuses on a contrast between his social picture of reasoning and what he calls the standard view. The contrast is dramatic: ‘this book explores how we might ... live together’ (p. 8). It’s not just that reasoning is itself a social activity, it is that reasoning on this picture is an activity that is constitutive of sociality and is not reducible, as the standard view would have it, to a set of cognitive operations (for example, calculating, deducing, problem solving and judging). Reasoning is the activity of exchanging and offering reasons. When we simply assert reasons (as does Mr Collins) we are not engaging in the activity of reasoning or at least not in the activity that Laden wants us to come to see as reasoning. In the social picture, reasons neither score points nor make slam dunks; they issue invitations to our interlocutors to see the world or the situation or the claim in the way that we see it. Something is a reason for X only if fellow reasoners take it to be a reason for X. Mr Collins offers



‘objective’ reasons for marriage but they are not reasons for Elizabeth, and, more to the point, that they do not speak to her appears completely irrelevant to Mr Collins. But if we are really and sincerely engaged in the activity of *offering* each other reasons then the fact that our interlocutor does not take our arguments as reasons must surely give us pause. This in turn suggests that what counts as a reason cannot be determined in advance or stipulated by principle. Finally, on this understanding, reasoning is ongoing rather than episodic. We do not, as it were, call up our reasoning powers to solve problems and then put those powers on hold as we go and do other things. Reasoning is more like conversation that ebbs and flows, has no natural end point and is pervasive in social interaction. Reasoning is a ‘practice that is social and ongoing, and largely consists in issuing invitations to take what we say as speaking for our interlocutors as well’ (p. 11).

Two further topics tied to the contrast with the standard view are dealt with in Part 1. The first topic is authority. On the standard view, reasoning ends in conclusions, judgments or decisions, and these end points have the authority of reason. Laden argues that this is a command view of authority: to possess the truth gives one the right to profess it and the obligation of the other to accept it. He offers an alternative view of authority that is embedded in connections. In the social picture of reasoning there are no definitive end points, and it is an essentially cooperative activity. Authority resides in a ‘we’, but not a legislative we (and hence an episodic we), but a ‘we’ constituted by an ongoing shared life. A central part of the argument is that reasoning is more like engaging in conversation than solitary calculation or a battle of wits. In Chapter 3 Laden makes a case for conversation as a rational activity. Here the influence of Stanley Cavell becomes explicit. Genuine conversations, even playful or casual conversations, are characterized by responsiveness and attunement. These two form the basis for an ever more exacting picture of reasoning developed in Part 2 of the book. Here Laden lays out in more detail the norms of reasoning, starting with informal conversation and then moving up through engaged conversation to engaged reasoning. Engaged reasoning includes both scientific and academic reasoning as well as practical and political deliberation in the public sphere. Part 3 of the book rounds out the argument with an account of the criteria for the evaluation of invitations. In particular, it asks what are warranted grounds for rejecting reasons and invitations. The book ends with a return to *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr Darcy’s proposal is placed alongside Mr Collins’ one. Mr Darcy is more successful with the eminently reasonable Elizabeth. Why? His reasons act as invitations and not commands.

Laden is very insistent on the idea that he is painting a conceptual picture of reasoning rather than making an argument that we must see as correct. This is first because he takes one of his cues from Wittgenstein and believes that we have been held captive by a picture. That picture is the standard view of reasoning that sees it as the work of a solitary mind executing procedures or applying principles. But don’t we do this? Don’t we sometimes have to reason this way? Laden’s point is not that calculation is not a form of reasoning. Instead, he invites us to contemplate an

alternative picture that might also be recognized as having a hold on us. His examples and illustrations are all drawn from real and realistic everyday situations. But they are drawn from social milieux that we might not normally think of as the carriers of reasoning. The picture Laden draws is personal and intimate. Again and again he comes back to characters in *Pride and Prejudice* navigating delicate and complicated social and moral situations or the picture of two people building and sharing a life together that require sorting out big and small issues of cooperation and coordination. Thus, the device of painting a picture allows Laden to be both descriptive and normative at the same time. He describes an activity that we do in fact engage in but that we do not necessarily take as an ideal. Finally, he speaks in terms of pictures as a way to practice this form of reasoning: ‘offering an ideal sketches a possibility to which we might aspire rather than argues that something is necessary or obligatory’ (p. 44). This is a deeply thought and beautifully crafted book, the details of which would be impossible to do justice to in this space. It offers a serious and substantial challenge to much contemporary thinking about reason in philosophy. But true to its ideal, Laden does not present it as a challenge but as an invitation to engage in some real reasoning about how we should understand the activity of reasoning.

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