

THINK BETTER

UNLOCKING
THE POWER OF
REASON

ULRICH L. LEHNER

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Introduction

EMPOWERING MINDS

As you think, so shall you become.” The first time I read this quote that some attribute to Bruce Lee, I was struck by how profound it was. It captures the wisdom of ancient Eastern and Western philosophy alike that our life “is what our thoughts make it” (Marcus Aurelius, 121–80 CE).¹ The way to more powerful and productive reasoning lies in using it to its fullest potential. For that purpose, we have to find out what reasoning is, how it works, and in what instances we can use it. By doing so, we will not only identify strategies to empower our minds but also begin to walk the path of philosophy and begin the search for wisdom. This quest is far from impractical because it enables us to become more focused in our work, find peace in our minds, and explore the hidden creativity of our souls. And believe me, I am speaking as someone who has found such empowerment.

For almost all my adult life I have engaged with questions of knowledge and truth, philosophy here, philosophy there, but only last year did the power of reasoning really become clear to me. I sat in the chair of a psychologist’s office. He was evaluating a long list of tests I had taken for the last four hours. My eyes were fixed on

him when he finally looked up, smiled, and said, “Your intuition was right. You definitely have ADHD!” I was not surprised, and neither was my family, who had always suspected it. Nevertheless, what amazed me was how bad I was at doing commonplace things, such as paying attention and being able to listen to others. Yet how had I been able to become a renowned researcher with these deficits? My psychologist told me the answer: “Because you must have developed behaviors that compensate for your lack of attention. And these behaviors made you successful.”

This revelation made me reflect on my life and how I had reached the point I was at now. What allowed me to function in the world I was in? How was I able to hold a position at one of America’s greatest universities? After a short time, I realized how I was able to cope. Since my earliest school days, I looked for behaviors that helped me control my ADHD impulses, without even knowing it. Suddenly it made sense why I found the rigorous routine of my old grandfather—including him wearing a tie every day until he was in his nineties—so impressive and worthy of imitation. I realized how I learned in church that rituals can structure your life and discipline your mind, and so on. Yet what seems to have been the most crucial influence was having been exposed to good reasoning, first at home and then at school. At my German high school, we read Plato and Aristotle in the original Greek in tenth grade! Ever since my teachers first gave me *The Apology of Socrates* by Plato, I was captivated by the power of reasoning and wanted to learn as much about it as I could. I was hooked!

Philosophical reasoning empowered me to develop discipline not only in thinking but also in observing: I knew I could pay attention to details that fascinated me—as every person with ADHD can testify to—but philosophy allowed me to do it with a method. Don’t get me wrong—I had to work at least twice as hard as any other student to understand things I found boring, but I did it. Wrapping my head around geometry in high school was so stressful for me that even years later I had nightmares

about it. Nevertheless, the tools of philosophy helped me to stay somewhat on course and not drift away completely every time something interesting popped into my head; they empowered me to navigate these difficult waters. I am convinced that the structure they provided me with was the key to my success in high school and beyond. I sometimes tell my doctoral students, “There were smarter students than me in the doctoral classes I took, yet they all lacked perseverance and structure. This is the real key to success.” Philosophical reasoning helped me to organize my mind, my studies, and my research. It empowered me to have a career that others were unable to achieve.

I am living proof that ordering one’s thought leads to happiness. Reasoning not only helped me with my studies but also improved the quality of my life. Reasoning leads to joy. The joy of mastering something always reminds me of diving. Plunging into the ocean equipped with a wet suit, goggles, and an oxygen tank opens up a new world of hidden colors, fish, corals, and rocks. Philosophical thinking is very similar—it invites you to dive deep into the structure of things. Just like with diving, however, you need to have the proper equipment, some principles, and a map. In this book, I hope to show you that reason allows you to discover answers to questions such as, Who am I? What can I know? What is good? What can I hope for?

Diving below is only one aspect of reasoning. The other is gaining perspective from above. I associate this with hiking in the mountains, probably because I grew up near the Alps. Not much compares to the feeling of accomplishment and awe when you have made it to the top. Adrenaline rushes through your body after the exhausting climb, your muscles ache, but once you see the landscape below, you lose yourself in the beauty in front of you. You see the different shades of snow around you, the vegetation along the mountainside, and far away the crystal waters of a lake. Only the jackdaws soaring in the thin air above you have a better view, seeing how even the mountaintop is connected to the landscape,

seeing things as a whole. Philosophy tries to accomplish this as well, not just diving into the structure of the world but also putting it all in perspective, understanding how things hang together. It is the ultimate way of holistic thinking.

Perhaps you are still not sure whether you want to continue with this book because it sounds too “brainy.” After all, what exactly do philosophers look for, and why would it be helpful for me to adopt some of their tools? Shouldn’t we instead imitate the hard sciences, which boast of their discoveries? But have you asked yourself what is at the beginning of a scientist’s work? You can’t just wake up one morning and decide to find a cure for cancer; you have to have a plan. You have to begin by making an observation, asking a question, forming a hypothesis, testing it, and so forth. What is it that makes the scientist ask the question in the first place? Humans desire to know not just facts, but the *whatness* of things, their inner reasons and causes. We want to know what this or that type of cancer is, how it develops and why, or why and how a plant produces this or that enzyme if it could also survive without it. This drive to know the *whatness* of the world moves us to dive into the structure of the world and examine the characteristics of something. And thus, the scientist also begins with *philosophical* questions and assumptions: By arranging a lab experiment, I have already made the philosophical assumption that I can trust my senses, that I am able to correctly assess the world outside my brain and thus can read the lab instruments properly. Moreover, I base my whole experiment on the assumption that the aspect of the world I have in my lab is intelligible and discoverable. Once we begin to see that every search for knowledge is based on certain underlying assumptions, we can start to examine and question what our other assumptions are—for example, what we believe politically—and thus are better able to understand those who disagree with us. Only if I gain insight into my own beliefs will I be able to also look rationally at another person’s perspective. I will also discover which of my beliefs are irrational, which

ones weigh me down and keep me from becoming the person I want to be. This will help me to express my thoughts in an orderly fashion so that I will be understood by others. Reason helps us to become better human beings and achieve a better quality of life.

The great philosophers have realized that every one of us has a desire to question things. We never stop asking questions. And it all begins with a sense of awe: we are intrigued by something we don't know but desire to know better. That's what drove the great physicists to discover the nature of matter, Watson and Crick to shed light on what DNA is, and Wernher von Braun to help build the first rockets that transported humans to the moon.² Discoveries begin with curiosity and awe about the mysteries we encounter and about which we want to know more. Nevertheless, the questions a philosopher asks are different from those a scientist would ask. While the biologist studies living things, the philosopher desires to know *what* things are, and *what* life is; philosophers use their mind, not a lab. The sciences, just like the humanities, look at very specific objects, while philosophy looks at the bedrock of things and the foundation of it all, and at how these things hang together in the whole of reality.

Lastly, I think that good reasoning would help this country. Millions of Americans seem to no longer want to listen to each other or even contemplate any counterargument to their ideas about life, liberty, and politics. We are stuck in a deadlock of partisan polarization in which we focus only on information that confirms our biases instead of critically engaging with what challenges them. Unlocking the powers of reason offers a way out of such a standstill because it empowers people to scrutinize texts (and images), distinguish aspects of questions, identify hidden presuppositions, and reject fallacious conclusions. A world dominated by half-truths and fake news cries out for more reason! About three-quarters of Americans label people from the other political party as "closed-minded," but at the same time, they detest the polarization of their country.³ They clearly see polarization as

a problem but do not know how to overcome it.⁴ I suggest that more and better reasoning might be a way forward: adopting more rationality not only aids the common good but can also lead to *mutual* learning, tolerance, and empathy as well as undermine prejudices and false assumptions. Reason has the power to bring people together and create unity because it is a gift we all share.

Since this book came about as a result of some soul searching, I wanted it to be personal and not driven by philosophical jargon or academic expectations. That's why I laid out what I consider helpful for myself, my kids, and my students in short chapters but in a way that lets the reader *join* the quest and take possession of the discoveries for herself.

It's needless to say that you might not agree with all my conclusions. But if this book helps you see that the diversity of our minds makes this world beautiful and that reasoning is a powerful tool for the good, then it has fulfilled its purpose.



Knowledge Is the Basis of Good Reasoning

Reasoning is not done in a vacuum. It always requires knowledge. I can only pursue certain ideas or plans if I know something about them first and then have the desire to inquire further. Therefore, if we really want to think more clearly, it is crucial to understand what knowledge is. Otherwise, we might search for knowledge either in the wrong places or with the wrong strategies.

Compare the powerful tool of reason with a knife: With a dull knife, you cannot even cut a simple roll. You might be able to use it for spreading some butter, but that is about it. Reason *without* knowledge is very much like a dull knife: it can't cut through the layers of information to get to the truth of the matter. By figuring out how knowledge works, we learn how to sharpen the knife of reason and how to use it properly.

Everyone already has some vague understanding of what it means to know something. Knowing is always intending something; it is intentional. For example, when I say, "I know how to repair cars," the repair skills are the object of my knowledge. (More about such intentionality in chap. 5.) Moreover, knowing implies a profound familiarity with an object: "If you can name the cause of something, you have understood it," as Aristotle once

said.¹ Applied to the car, this principle means the person who knows automotive repairs understands *how* the whole machine works. She is able to accurately pinpoint various malfunctions and their causes, and of course she knows how to resolve the issues. Therefore, a student who merely regurgitates information does not “know,” because he lacks deeper understanding of the object.

Knowledge Is Conversational

How does such understanding come about? The answer to this riddle lies in the fact that *all* our understanding is expressed in words. Words are signs used and created by humans to find orientation in the world or to communicate with each other. Consequently, we have to take a close look at how humans use language to communicate with each other, because without such interactions there would be no knowledge.

For any statement or judgment about the world or ourselves, about real or abstract things, we use words. Whether it is a tree, my experience of tooth pain, the law of gravity, or a mathematical law, without words we would not know the world. You can do a simple experiment yourself: Stare outside your window. You will have a sensory impression, but the moment you focus on something, you use words (e.g., when you are looking at the car driving by, even if you just think “car”). There is consequently no knowledge without language. Most importantly, however, we use language when we communicate with another person, in a *conversation*. Without language, we could not communicate complex messages to each other.² Humans learn from each other, and because we are social animals, the mystery of how knowledge works can be found in our conversations.

We all have conversations, but what is a conversation exactly? How would you describe the nature of a conversation to someone? A good starting point would be to describe it as an exchange of words between at least two people who are also listeners. In order

to comprehend the content of the conversation, it is not enough that I am able to listen (my bird can listen too). I also have to be able to understand what is being said (the meaning of the words). I must be able to understand whether my counterpart describes something, shares with me an evaluation, expresses his feelings, and so forth. A parrot might repeat a sentence, but a human has the ability to bring what she has heard “into” her own self: she is able to react to the sentences by pondering their meaning and reflecting on them. Thus a conversation necessarily presupposes at least two persons who are independent beings. When I say, “You have made an excellent point,” I recognize that I am speaking to a being who is independent of me, endowed with the same basic knowledge of language as I am. As August Brunner said, “The other, the Thou is therefore a center just like me, a center which owns itself and has power over its acts. . . . The Thou presents to us a reality which in no way is a mere projection or the creation of my fantasy.”³

Having the ability to open oneself up to other such independent beings, or *Thous*, and to the world is a crucial element of being human. Without it, there would be no conversation and, consequently, no knowledge, and especially no rich personal life. Even if we withdraw into the silence of the mountains and carry our thoughts with us, “we always take our language along, without which we cannot think” and which cannot work without openness to other things. With such openness also comes the realization that I am a self and that through an encounter with other I’s, I can learn or get to know more about myself and the world we share.⁴

Conversations happen . . . in time. It might seem unnecessary to state this obvious fact, but it is an important characteristic. Talking with somebody happens in the flow of time, where one word follows the next, with a pause, a question being answered, an argument rebuffed, and so forth. The meaning of what we say is not so much tied up in individual words but in the whole string of words we produce. “Only at the end of a sentence, when the

sound of the words has already died away and exists no more, do the words gain meaning.”⁵ In order to understand sentences and interactions, however, we obviously need the ability to remember what was said before and keep the conversation and its meaning present to our mind so that we can also anticipate to a certain extent how it will continue. Memory is the ability to *own our past* and *recognize it as such*. Memory is tremendously powerful and is essential to our quality of life, which makes illnesses such as dementia all the more tragic.⁶ Something in the flow of a conversation remains stable, and that is the self. Only from such an unchanging perspective am I able to judge change, use my memory, and anticipate events: only because I am an independent self do I understand that the person I am speaking with is going to propose a business deal to me. I can anticipate it because I remember his behavior on other occasions, and in those he always suggested a business deal. Conversations therefore require *selves*, which means that despite all advances in technology, we will never be able to have a real conversation with a computer.

How to Train Your Will, or When It Is Better to Shut Up

A conversation happens between at least two people who usually alternate between speaking and listening. If I constantly shut down the dialogue with my own monologue, however, I lose the chance of learning anything new and run the risk of getting stuck in false assumptions. A crucial component for acquiring more accurate and complete knowledge, therefore, is the ability to listen, which requires humility.

In the last few decades, a number of philosophers have highlighted the close connection between such virtues as listening/humility and knowledge (*virtue epistemology*). In antiquity, the method for reshaping one’s behavior was called *askēsis*, and it was a mindset for training the virtuous self. In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle argued that virtue was not about the quality of an action

but rather about the quality of a person. Virtues, such as justice, prudence, fortitude, and so forth, could shape and transform a person, a bit like how regular exercise changes an athlete's whole body. A way of intensifying and speeding up growth in virtue was deliberate training by *askēsis*. It entailed giving up certain goods for a defined period of time, such as eating meat. By doing so, one not only became more appreciative of the good one had given up—in this case the ability to enjoy a steak—but first and foremost one trained the *will*. It is, after all, our will that *makes us do things*. Even if I do not want to silence my dialogue partner, I still might not have the willpower and virtue to hold my tongue and listen. The philosopher Immanuel Kant calls this practice the “cultivation” of virtue.⁷

Asceticism as a training of the will makes us more aware of our own self *and* of our actions. It gives us a magnifying glass to see what was hitherto covered up in the rubbish pile of our psyche. By identifying *ascetic* goals, I acquire mental discipline and become profoundly aware of what I am capable of, both the good and the bad. I could, for example, abstain from gossiping about others. This might help me realize that my gossip was just a way of expressing my own unhappiness and jealousy . . . and so forth. Such ascetical exercises train our mind for disciplined thinking, too, because they make us cautious, curtail overconfidence, and improve our ability to listen and be more empathetic.⁸

If this doesn't convince you, perhaps you can think about asceticism from the perspective of *external influences*: social media, the workplace, and other external influences constantly throw images and texts at us; our everyday experience forces us to tune many of them out in order to focus on our job and our family duties. If we, however, become *complacent* enough to no longer actively tune out such influences, they will overpower us. As long as you are aware of your filter, you can adjust it (e.g., by ascetic practices), but once you've lost it, you can easily become sucked into a hole of misery. Instead of tuning out things like social media influences,

we become enslaved to them and to the material world. We become blind to values such as beauty and truth because we are too focused on what we should buy or invest our money in. Then we can no longer appreciate the beauty of snow falling or the wonder of a spiderweb on our window, or, even worse, we become deaf to the needs of a spouse who would like our attention.⁹

The better we prepare our mind to properly receive the impulses from the world outside, the more “realistic” we are, and the more appropriately we are able to act in conversation. By bracketing my self-interest for the moment and letting something “speak” to me, I not only practice a form of asceticism, but I also learn to appreciate things on their own terms. One easy way of demonstrating this is to ask yourself whether you can experience the beauty even of a gray and dark day in the city, or of a rock pigeon. Can you still perceive their beauty, or do you view almost everything under the perspective of how *you* can use it or how it serves *your* purposes? If you feel that the scales are in favor of what some call “me-ism,” then you might be attached to material goods in a way that subdues not only your ethics but also your mind! Instead of “breathing with” the things and people we encounter—that’s the original meaning of *con-spire*—you simply breathe *at* them because you only know how to use them. Instead of cooperating with the world, you are trying to conquer it; the worst, however, is that because of these shackles you have lost the liberty to encounter a world in which truth, beauty, and goodness still matter.¹⁰

We started this chapter by searching for how knowledge works, and we found that it is always expressed in language. Language, however, exists in and for conversation, and there is no knowledge without conversation, because without conversation there would be no language. Now we can turn to knowledge itself and ask what it really is.