

In Defence of Misology

Misology:
Dislike or distrust of reasoning

The misologue hates reasoning. She declines to engage in it herself (except within strict limits) and wishes others would engage in it much less than they do. She finds reasoning tiring and unpleasant and thinks that reasoning has caused much of the pain and suffering and unhappiness in the world.

For the misologue, instinct, inspiration, intuition, spontaneity, experience, luck, feeling, emotion, passion, faith, habit, tradition, custom, authority—whichever of these she opposes to reason—is a surer guide to success in life and more productive of happiness than is reasoning.

A little reasoning about the right things at the right time is fine. If one has a lot of tasks to accomplish in an afternoon, for instance, there's nothing wrong with thinking a little to find an efficient order in which to do them. But be careful! Don't get carried away!

According to the misologue, a person given to reasoning will be much less happy or content than he could be. And he will bring unhappiness and discontent to others.

Fifteen Considerations in Defence of Misology

1) Reasoning is unpleasant work

It's no fun to think hard about something. Thinking hard is hard work.

It is hard to keep relevant information before one's mind, and to ignore irrelevant information. It's hard to put what one wants to be true aside. It's hard not to let one's mind wander.

It's hard to organize one's thoughts into arguments. It's hard to subject one's inferences to scrutiny. It's hard to become aware of the assumptions one is making and to subject them to scrutiny.

Thinking hard about something is like going to the dentist. It's no fun in itself, though maybe now and then it's prudent to do. (It's at least like taking the bus. No one wants to take the bus, but sometimes there's no better way available to get where one wants to go.)

2) Reasoning is time consuming

Time spent thinking is time one could have spent doing something else—something that one likes to do.

3) To reason about something is to set oneself up for embarrassment and a kick to one's self-esteem

There's good reasoning and there's bad reasoning. And standards of good reasoning are high and exacting. It is not easy to meet them.

Thus, whenever one reasons, one risks reasoning poorly.

To try to do something but to fail at it is embarrassing and it makes one feel bad about oneself. Therefore, to reason about something is to put oneself at great risk of feeling like something the cat dragged in. —Better not even to try.

4) Reasoning puts one at risk of entertaining unpleasant thoughts

When one reasons hypothetically, one imagines events or situations that don't actually obtain—or, at least, might not actually obtain. Sometimes the events or situations one considers as hypotheses are terrible or frightening or distressing: that one's child is mentally retarded, for instance, or that one's partner no longer loves one. Thinking about these hypotheses and thinking through their consequences can be terrifying or distressing.

5) Reasoning is not a secure route to the truth

To reason about matters of fact is to try to discover the truth about those matters. But things are often very complicated. Unless one keeps in mind everything relevant to the matter, the conclusions one reaches will not likely be true.

Even if one does keep in mind all relevant evidence, often some evidence speaks one way while other evidence speaks the other way. Coming to a conclusion in such cases is either guessing or a matter of taste.

Moreover, reasoning begins from one or another belief or hypothesis that was not itself generated by reasoning, but instead came from sensation or memory or someone's say-so. The conclusions got by reasoning, even those got through nothing but valid or strong inferences, can be no better than the raw materials, and we all know that beliefs acquired from sensation, memory, or other people can be false. Garbage in, garbage out.

6) Reasoning is no better a route to the truth than many others

Still, the defender of reasoning might say, reasoning is a better route to the truth of the matter at hand than is any other.

But instincts and passions serve creatures without reason very well, and there is no reason to think that they don't serve us well, as well. Our feelings and emotions also are sources of information we can rely on.

Our habits, customs, and traditions must have something going for them, or else they would not still be with us. The voice of conscience that we hear, or the voice of the divine, has long proven itself a voice of insight into the ways of the world.

And those in whom is vested special authority over religion or medicine or politics or law or customs or manners must know what they are talking about, or else authority would not have come to be vested in them.

7) About many important matters reasoning is impotent

What is truly valuable in itself? What is the highest good? How ought societies be organized and to what end? What makes an action immoral? Is freedom to take precedence over equality should in some case we are not able to realize both? Does welfare rightly trump justice? Why is Beethoven better than Tchaikovsky? Why was Hitler worse than Stalin? Does God exist? What does God require of us? Does everything have a reason? Is the universe a causally closed system? What will tomorrow be like? What is the meaning of life? What is my proper place in the scheme of things?

Reason can establish no answer to any of these questions. Indeed, for any well-argued answer to any of them, there is an equally fine argument to a conflicting answer.

And yet these questions are among the most significant we can ask.

For answers to these most important questions we must step away from science and philosophy and instead look to instinct or inspiration or emotion or tradition or religion or authority.

8) Reasoning often deforms the subject matter to which it is applied

Reasoning can establish truths only within those subject matters that are themselves tractable by reason, that is, within those matters that are not themselves contradictory, changing, fluid, chaotic, value-laden, vague, or confused. For reasoning (and its associates, such as double blind trials and the method of conjecture and refutation) to work, it must be applied to a subject that has a mathematical structure and that is not itself altered by being reasoned about. Much of the world, though, does not admit of quantification, and much of the world is affected just by being observed. Much of the world, then, is essentially irrational and, so, inexplicable and intractable.

When reasoners set out to investigate the intangible, the qualitative, the irrational, the fluid, the inexplicable, they necessarily impose mathematical and logical structure on it. What they find, then, is not what is really there, but a twisted, filtered, and deformed version of it, as if it were seen in a fun-house mirror.

Much of life and human affairs is neither quantifiable nor indifferent to being observed. Hence, much of life and human affairs can only be misrepresented when reasoned about. Neglect of this point lies behind behaviourism, sociobiology, atheism, modern art, efficiency experts, foreign aid, economic theory, liberal feminism, suburbs, WalMart, and on and on. Many of the worst features of modern life can be laid at the door of reason's pronouncing on things it is constitutionally incapable of seeing for what they are.

9) Oftentimes it's unimportant what we believe

Very often what we seek is not the truth regarding some matter of fact, but practical advice or direction. We don't want to determine what the facts are; we want, rather, to decide what to do.

In dealing with practical problems the great thing against worrying and fretting is just to get on with it. All that matters is that we do something, anything.

It doesn't matter for our success in dealing with some problem whether we believe something or not, and even less whether what we believe is well evidenced. What matters is that we are acting.

Don't try to reason out which line at the supermarket will move quickest; just get into a line. Don't try to evaluate supposed cold remedies; just take something. Don't check under hoods; just pick a car. Eeny meeny miney moe is the way to go. (E.E. Evans-Pritchard found running his household by consulting the chicken oracle as fine a method of dealing with everyday problems as any he'd tried.)

10) Oftentimes it's unimportant whether our belief is true

What makes for a good life is a positive outlook. What makes for a positive outlook is optimism, self-confidence, and peace of mind. What makes for optimism and self-confidence and peace of mind is having the right beliefs.

The right beliefs to have are the beliefs that things will work out well, that one can manage whatever comes one's way, that one is well liked by the people one sees daily, and that one is generally a good person.

Whether these beliefs are true or well evidenced is entirely unimportant. All that matters for having a good life is that one holds them.

Indeed, it's stupid to go reasoning in these areas, for by doing so one can easily come to appreciate how poorly grounded in fact are the beliefs behind one's optimism or one's self-confidence or one's peace of mind. And that can cause one to lose what makes for a good life.

11) Reasoning paralyses will

I cannot act until I am sure, and so I will sit here to think some more. And some more. But reasoning will never bring me certainty. And then the moment for acting passes, and I've lost the game.

Or: I count up the pros and cons of doing A and of doing B, for I cannot do both and I want to do the right one. But in reasoning about A I come to see danger at every turn. Perhaps worse, I come to appreciate that success might not be any great thing in the end. In reasoning about B I likewise both see danger everywhere and come to perceive the poverty of success. Each of A and B is fraught, and neither is worth the effort anyway. Since both options are dangerous and pointless, I do nothing.

12) Reasoning serves dogmatism and closed mindedness

Reasoning can lead to conviction, and conviction makes for dogmatism. Reasoners are convinced that no space aliens are abducting humans, that Elvis is dead, that whatever gods might exist are entirely indifferent to human affairs, that mind reading is impossible, that species

evolve by means of natural and sexual selection, that we ought to be free to speak our minds, that there is no collective unconscious, that there's nothing wrong with abortion.

Their conviction causes them to be dogmatic about these matters, to dismiss out of hand any opposing view.

In that way they close themselves off from many upon many exciting possibilities and become unable to experience wonder.

13) Reasoning destroys conviction

Reasoners are open minded about things, always re-evaluating their beliefs and the paths they have chosen in light of whatever new evidence comes their way. That they are never dogmatic makes them wishy-washy. They lack the conviction and moral certainty necessary to deal with the realities of the dangerous times in which we live.

14) Reasoners have unattractive personalities

Reasoners do not accept what others say just on the strength of their saying it. They raise questions of evidence and logic. They attempt to evaluate what others say according to reason's own standards of epistemic warrant.

But this is to take a judgemental attitude toward the claims and explanations of others. And, indeed, it is to take a judgemental attitude toward those others themselves.

It is no good to be judgemental!

Yet, as a matter of their personality, reasoners simply cannot adopt the core attitudes of an attractive personality, specifically, that every opinion is as good as every other opinion, that a person's opinions are always valid for that person, and that each person's opinion has something in it useful for everyone else.

15) Reasoners make for lousy company

No one wants to be around a reasoner. Reasoners insist that you provide them with reasons to justify what you say. This makes you uncomfortable, either because it annoys you or because it causes you to doubt what you say.

Their requests and comments stop the conversation and throw a wet blanket over everything.

They are cold and hard. Their only passion is for dispassion, and that's just weird.

Spending an evening with a reasoner is about as much fun as spending an evening with a logic text.