2.A: the ***Philosophyldeas*** overview of

The Nature of Reason

In ordinary talk we ask people for 'reasons' (for beliefs or behaviour), and we ask them to 'be reasonable'. In human activity reason serves as both a guide and an explanation. Reasons can be 'inadequate', or even 'bad', and people sometimes do worthwhile things 'for no particular reason'. Without some concept of reason, though, it is hard to imagine philosophy existing as a distinct activity. So is there some single core which marks out reason from other types of thinking? It is tempting to connect reason with language, and with formal logic, but we normally think someone is irrational if they thoughtlessly harm themselves, and we might describe an animal as 'stupid'. Since plants can't be stupid, we can at least assume that reason involves minds. We can distinguish two activities – assessing a reason against reality, and assessing reasons against one another. If reasons are given why a tree fell over, or why it should be cut down, it is reality that settles which reasons are right.

When two reasons meet, a common suggestion is that contradiction is the most basic phenomenon in reason. Multitudes of diverse reasons can co-exist, but only up to the point where we say 'they can't both be true'. Contradictions can arise within the reasons, or because of externals. If I say 'it's blue' and you say 'it's not blue', no experience is needed to see the contradiction. If I say 'put this square peg into this round hole', reality will contradict me. The striking feature of contradictions is that they force us to reject one or both sides of them – so we feel the power of reason, and may not be able to explain that power. We have hit something fundamental in reason. We can then identify this power, or necessity, in other parts of reasoning, as when we say 'we agree that if it is raining the match is cancelled, and it's raining'. When persuading people we try to make them 'see sense', by placing the reasons before them in such a way that their power becomes obvious. No one is persuaded if they don't see some rational 'force' in the reasons.

Part of this power of reason must derive from the nature of reality, where pegs must fit holes, but the power also derives from an expectation of 'consistency'. If you hear the remark about the match, but announce that it will be played anyway, you have gone back on what you agreed. If you agree to a series of statements, then your further beliefs are expected to agree with the series, even before you have realised what those further beliefs are. We see that a set of statements has 'implications', and it is at this point that reason acquires a life of its own, that goes beyond human psychology. That is, we may feel the 'power' of reasons because that is the sort of odd creature we are, and we may want people to be 'consistent' because that is fashionable behaviour around here, but statements seem to have 'implications' whether we like it or not.

In ancient Greece the word *logos* tried to capture the concept of giving the persuasive reasons for something. If the *logos* is sufficiently clear, accurate and comprehensive, then disagreement should be impossible. The idea gradually emerged that while you could give all sorts of reasons for a belief, there was something called 'pure reason', where the context didn't matter, and the implications were beyond dispute. Many philosophers developed a faith in the power of pure reason, especially when it was combined with another thought. Maybe reason is not just an activity of minds, especially human minds, but also something that runs through reality, so that reality is rational, and the truths about reality form a natural structure, seen in a series of unavoidable implications. Combining the ideas of 'pure reason' and a 'rational structure' in reality, we might hope that if our minds follow these sequences of implications, they will converge on the natural structure, and a logical map of reality might unfold before us. This is the ultimate dream of 'rationalist' philosophy, and it is hard for anyone who reasons not to be touched by a glimmer of such optimism. After all, trains of reasoning do seem to 'lead' somewhere.

The reaction to this dream was not long in arriving, and the limited and specific character of human minds, along with our limited and specific range of experience, seemed to imply that such grand rationalist visions were beyond us. In modern times theories about reason have expanded beyond the 'pure' dreams of some philosophers, and psychologists, biologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists and sociologists all contribute views about reason, often taking a relativist view of different styles of reasoning. It is observed, for example, that reasoners don't give up when they hit an inconsistency, but often 'work round' the problem. There even seems to be a rationality in assessing what is beautiful, or in how we direct our emotions. And maybe reason is just not that important.

A different approach to the matter arises when the idea of constructing a machine that 'thinks' is developed. Logicians map the theoretical limits of what can be implemented with the strict rules that a machine must employ, but the interesting aspect is those parts of reasoning that seem beyond this mechanised logic. This seems to mostly concern rational assessments of evidence, rather than comparisons between clearly formulated reasons. Even logicians, though, seem willing to accept that what is true often exceeds what can be proved. This leaves the philosophers trying to pin down the sort of reasoning which can identify unproven truths and evidence, distinguishing the latter from its background, and assessing its truth even when merely following some logical implications won't do the job.

The idea of 'coherence' in assessing the truth of something seems to contain a type of reasoning which is not precise. When people are reasoning they spot similarities and analogies, and they extrapolate from the known to what is or is not possible. They infer underlying explanations which can unite diverse phenomena, and see that one broad picture hangs together better than some rival picture. There is also open-ended reasoning, which reaches conclusions, but remains flexible as further evidence arrives. These types of thought are labelled 'induction' and 'explanation', but there seem to be hidden criteria at work when we decide what has overall 'coherence'.

The ideals which derive from the idea of 'pure' reason won't go away. We speak now of the 'space of reasons', a democratic meeting ground for thoughts, where their intrinsic rational merits and weaknesses point us objectively towards the truth. Good reasoning has a set of 'virtues'. We see that we must identify or weed out presuppositions prior to good reasoning, that the scope of the reasoning must be unrestricted, and that there must be no constraint on where the reasoning has to end. The idea of good and successful reasoning just won't go away.