

2013

## Review of In Praise of Reason by Michael P. Lynch

William Simkulet

Cleveland State University, [w.simkulet@csuohio.edu](mailto:w.simkulet@csuohio.edu)

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### Repository Citation

Simkulet, William, "Review of In Praise of Reason by Michael P. Lynch" (2013). *Philosophy and Religious Studies Department Faculty Publications*. 17.

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July 2013

## Review of "In Praise of Reason"

William Simkulet  
*University of Kansas*

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### Recommended Citation

Simkulet, William (2013) "Review of "In Praise of Reason"," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1479>

## Book Review | *In Praise of Reason*

**William Simkulet**

Published online: 27 July 2013

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***In Praise of Reason*; Michael P. Lynch, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012, 184 pp, \$19.95 pbk., ISBN 97800-262-01722-0**

### **I. Introduction**

Michael P. Lynch's book is a smart and innovative approach to resolving the problem of skepticism towards reason and science, and a step towards solving the growing political division epitomized by the current political climate in the United States. Lynch treats both problems as arising from disagreement about our fundamental epistemic principles, and attempts to answer skeptical concerns by constructing a method by which rational agents can commit themselves to fundamental epistemic principles, a method he argues favors two sets of principles, those principles we, as humans, simply cannot give up, and open, public principles like those of scientific inquiry.

This book is a strong defense of reason, giving reasons, and pursuing rational debate. In early chapters, Lynch presents a plausible account of the role reason plays in our deliberative processes backed by modern experimental evidence, and challenges the interpretation of a number of infamous studies that purport to show that many of our decisions are made without regard to reasons. In the primary argument in this book, found in chapter five, Lynch adapts John Rawls' original position as a means of demonstrating which fundamental epistemic principles it is rational to adopt.

### **II. Outline**

The book is divided into six chapters. After a rousing preface in which Lynch touts the value of rational discourse and appealing to reasons, the first chapter serves as an introduction to the problem of skepticism that the book takes issue with – skepticism about

science's ability to produce knowledge. The primary source of this skepticism appears to be religious individuals whose skepticism is primarily the result of science's perceived inconsistencies with religious teachings, although Lynch seeks to address the philosopher's skeptic, one who questions whether any of our fundamental epistemic principles can ever be justified, whether they aim at truth, and whether there can ever be reasons to adopt a common set of fundamental epistemic principles.

In the second chapter, on rationality, Lynch seeks to address the role reason and the emotions play in our decision making process, and he argues that classic philosophical treatments that placed the two at odds were misguided, and that recent evidence shows that both are necessary for us to function. The third chapter, on skepticism, begins with a discussion of radical skepticism and René Descartes' infamous response, before focusing on the more focused skepticism about science. It is here he introduces us to the example of Smith, a "young-earth" creationist sincerely interested in discovering truth, and hopeful that science can provide such truth. Where Lynch and Smith differ is that for Smith, the Bible is the most reliable method for discovering truth about the origin of the planet, and thus when there is a conflict between the Bible and science, his fundamental epistemic principles dictate the former wins out.

In the fourth chapter, Lynch presents an answer to the problem of skepticism; when justification comes to an end, he appeals to David Hume's theory that there are some beliefs that human beings simply cannot give up, and that these serve as an unjustified, but rational foundation for our beliefs. However, the problem of skepticism about science remains because the fundamental epistemic principles of science are not among these foundational beliefs.

In the fifth chapter, Lynch constructs a method by which human beings could evaluate fundamental rational principles without justifying them by adapting Rawls' original position and veil of ignorance. Lynch argues that in such a scenario, open, public, self-correcting epistemic principles, like those of logic and science, are likely to win out over closed principles, such as the appeal to religious texts. The sixth chapter is a defense of philosophy and the role the humanities play in discovering truth.

### III. Review

Lynch writes a strong and easily accessible response to skepticism about reason and scientific inquiry. One of the most appealing aspects about this book is the way in which Lynch has apparently mastered the art of tying classical philosophical arguments to contemporary scientific findings.

One of the most substantive contributions of the book, though, is Lynch's original and well thought out interpretation of several studies that have been cited as evidence that human beings are largely irrational and make choices based more on bias than reasons. In one such study, Alexander Todorov and Charles Ballew had presented students with pictures of the faces of Democrat and Republican candidates in an upcoming election, and asked them which they believed to be more competent, and found that students had predicted the winners approximately 70% of the time. (11-12) Lynch argues that often times we know things by intuition, even though we may be able to explain how we know them, and contends that the students in this study may have been picking up on subtle facial expressions that conveyed competence or other features that related to their electability. Lynch discusses several similar cases, and for each offers a persuasive alternative interpretation of the data, explaining that agents could be seen as acting rationally.

One of the more innovative features of this book is how Lynch addresses skepticism through an appeal to political philosophy; indeed Lynch cites the current rocky political climate in the United States as cause for great concern. In pursuit of a response to this problem, Lynch sets out to offer a systematic response to a skeptic who questions whether the scientific method is a more reliable method to pursue truth and practical knowledge than alternative methods, such as an appeal to the Bible. Science, he claims, is an open, public, and self-correcting discipline with practical application to our lives.

At several points in the book, Lynch warns us against merely throwing our hands up and declaring that those who disagree with us are idiots, irrational, or incapable of being reasoned with. He dedicates much of the book to arguing that as human beings we share many fundamental epistemic principles, that we can change which principles we are committed to, and that to do so can be rational. His primary argument is intended to show that it is rational for skeptics about science to abandon their position.

Unfortunately, it's not at all clear that Lynch's defense of reason is the most practical case to be made to the perpetrators of such skepticism. Consider his example of Smith, who is stipulated to be primarily interested in discovering truth, and believes that when our best scientific theories about the age of the planet are in conflict with the Bible, we should believe the latter. One of the more troubling aspects about Smith's position is that the Bible has a number of notable contradictions in the book of Genesis that details the origin of the world. Thus, if Smith is a true Biblical scholar, he must believe either that the Bible is an imperfect record of history (perhaps marred by human interference with the text) or he must give up the principle of non-contradiction. If the latter, were scientific evidence to contradict the Bible there would be no problem – as for Smith holding two contradictory beliefs true at the same time is not a problem.

Furthermore, often times it is not the Bible that is *prima facie* inconsistent with scientific evidence, but a particular religious narrative and interpretation of the text. The Bible is largely silent on many issues, and thus it is often not a problem to place one's trust in the Bible ahead of science. In such cases, it only becomes a problem if one is apparently obscenely ignorant about the contents of the Bible – a text that by stipulation one holds in high regard – and defers to the interpretation of the text by others whose interpretation may be partially inspired by their personal biases. Lynch praises the scientific method as an open, public endeavor. Bible consultation and interpretation, too, can be open to anyone with a copy of the text. Much as Lynch demonstrates that the interpretation of scientific data, such as in the Todorov and Ballew study, can be misleading, so too can interpretation of the Bible, especially in cases where interpreters unabashedly smooth over blatant contradictions, or when they emphasize parts of the Bible they believe support their personal biases.

Lynch chalks the problem with our current political climate up to a battle between those with a fundamental epistemic commitment to science and reason and those with a fundamental epistemic commitment to faith and religion. However, it seems as though the conflict is primarily between those who take their fundamental epistemic commitments seriously – religious or scientific – and those who do not. After all, climate change deniers are perfectly happy to quote scientific studies when it supports their position without regard to the larger body of scientific data just as opponents of homosexuality are happy to quote the portions of Leviticus without regard for the book's other less popular passages, such as those condoning slavery and condemning trimming one's beard. But this is not to say that the conflict is between a rational, self-reflective segment of the population, and an irrational one; rather it seems that many of us can get quite far with only a cursory understanding of science and religion.

Lynch cites the Quine-Duhem hypothesis as an explanation of why people are reluctant to change their beliefs in light of evidence – our beliefs are interconnected with each other like a web, with those at the ends of the web being easiest to change, and those towards the center being more difficult; when confronted with a small piece of evidence that purports to contradict something at the center of the web, it is easy to reject that evidence than to revise one's entire belief-set. (33) The trick to changing one's mind, it seems, is to keep confronting them with evidence that appeals to their fundamental epistemic principles... or at least the ones they espouse. For example, when a group cites a study that purports to show climate change is false, we ought to overwhelm them with contradictory studies, or a study of studies. Similarly, when a group quotes Leviticus in opposition of homosexual marriage, we ought to overwhelm them by reading passages of Leviticus that the group

probably disagrees with and thus demonstrating either the group's hypocrisy or encouraging them to revise their beliefs about the applicability of Leviticus to our current debate.

Let's return our focus to Smith, Lynch's responsible young-earth creationist. Because Smith cannot come to give up his fundamental epistemic commitment to the principle of non-contradiction, he cannot interpret the contradictory passages of the story of Genesis as literally true, and thus cannot help himself to the literal interpretation of the text that the Earth was created in seven days. Without this, Smith has no reason to be a young-earth creationist, and has every reason to believe in the current findings of science because his epistemic commitment to the Bible is not in opposition to these findings. In short, even if Smith has good reason, as Lynch argues, to prioritize scientific evidence over Biblical text, by consulting the pages of the Bible Smith has good reason to believe that the text was not meant to be a literal history of the origin of the planet.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

I highly recommend this book. Lynch offers a robust defense of reason from skepticism, provides a coherent alternative interpretation for a number of current scientific studies that some have purported to show that humanity is largely irrational, and offers a unique and thoughtful argument for why one should adopt open, public, self-correcting fundamental epistemic principles like those employed by science. Lynch offers as plausible a response to skepticism as possible – after all, there is something fundamentally amiss about the skeptic who gives reasons for skepticism about giving reasons – and comes to some conclusions that have positive implications for resolving the contemporary problems in the current U.S. political climate. Lynch's program is an innovative union of epistemology and political philosophy. My one worry is that the problem facing us is not one of widespread commitment to ineffective fundamental epistemic commitments, as Lynch believes, but a moral failing where in certain people simply do not take their fundamental epistemic commitments seriously – in other words, they do not do their homework.