What Rationality Means to Me



If life were a test—would you prefer that it were multiple choice or an essay question? I always preferred essays for all the wrong reasons. It was much more subjective, free-flowing; I felt like if I wrote two or three sentences that weren't outright absurd, I would get a passing grade. As opposed to multiple choice tests, which I felt had this brooding, judgmental quality—only one right answer, so use your number two pencil wisely. Lately, it seems like two drastically different schools of thought are beginning to emerge about how we should approach our own lives: is this multiple choice or an essay question? And this question, I believe, has drastic and essential implications for how we prepare ourselves to live meaningful lives.

For those who prefer essay questions, so to speak, we are living in the golden age of "lived experience" as the litmus test for authenticity. People talk about living "my truth." They make life decisions based on "what resonates" and reject ideas if they don't cohere with their personal narratives. Honestly, I am guilty of this. I pay close attention to my own inner monologue—maybe too much attention—and have likely made some good decisions (and a chunk of bad ones, too) based on what seemed right according to my own lived experience. In other words, I often speak my truth.

Multiple choice tests are also going through a renaissance of sorts. There's an emerging group of rationalists online that have sharpened the blade of reason that allows for some pretty precise surgical reasoning. Whether it is Eliezer Yudkowsky's *Less Wrong*—I was in yeshiva with his little brother of blessed memory and his sister is a friend and colleague—or the writings of Scott Alexander on *Slate Star Codex*, I am grateful for these sites and thinkers for sharpening my own thinking and approach to life. I am a mediumly successful amateur investor and sharp, incisive reasoning has transformed the way I approach investing, consider companies, and more generally approach life.

The question I have always had is: how do you figure out which approach to use for which kind of decisions?

Now, of course, grouping a whole chunk of ideas into a neat analogy of multiple choice or essay is beyond an oversimplification. But many, particularly following the Enlightenment, used similar archetypes to explain how we approach the world. My dear friend, Jeffery Bloom, in one of his extraordinarily long but welcome emails to me shared the words of Leo Strauss in his preface to the 1965 printing of *Spinoza's Critique of Reason*. Jeff is working on a collection of essays reacting to Strauss's introduction. There, Strauss writes:

> The results of this examination of Spinoza's critique may be summarized as follows. If orthodoxy claims to know that the Bible is divinely revealed, that every word of the Bible is divinely inspired, that Moses was the writer of the Pentateuch, that the miracles recorded in the Bible have happened and similar things, Spinoza has refuted orthodoxy. But the case is entirely different if orthodoxy limits itself to asserting that it believes the aforementioned things, i.e. that they cannot claim to possess the binding power peculiar to the known. For all assertions of orthodoxy rest on the irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God whose will is unfathomable, whose ways are not our ways, who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may exist.
>
> Given this premise, miracles and revelations in general, and hence all Biblical miracles and revelations in particular, are possible. Spinoza has not succeeded in showing that this premise is contradicted by anything we know. For what we are said to know, for example, regarding the age of the solar system, has been established on the basis of the assumption that the solar system has come into being naturally; miraculously it could have come into being in the way described by the Bible. …

> The genuine refutation of orthodoxy would require the proof that the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a mysterious God; it would require at least the success of the philosophic system: man has to show himself theoretically and practically as the master of the world and the master of his life; the merely given world must be replaced by the world created by man theoretically and practically. Spinoza's *Ethics* attempts to be the system but it does not succeed; the clear and distinct account of everything that it presents remains fundamentally hypothetical. As a consequence, its cognitive status is not different from that of the orthodox account.
>
> Certain it is that Spinoza cannot legitimately deny the possibility of revelation. **But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life: philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral.**

Here, Strauss develops his two paths of knowledge: reason and revelation. And, as Strauss notes, they don't seem to be talking to each other. Neither approach, says Strauss, can positively disprove or disqualify the other. So then, with what are we left? Should we attempt to ground religion exclusively on reason? Develop a multiple choice test option for ideas usually transmitted in essay form?

We cannot sacrifice the mystery of human experience on the altar of reasoned calculation…

My friend and 18Forty Podcast guest this month, Zohar Atkins, also contends with Strauss' typology of reason and revelation. In his fabulous essay series, *What Is Called Thinking*, he actually brings Strauss' reason and revelation closer to our earlier dichotomy of reason and lived experience. Reb Zohar writes:

Reason is internal to us, while Revelation comes from without. Reason is universal, while Revelation is particular to a community. Reason is timeless (1+1=2 is true for all time); Revelation takes place in history, separating time into a "before" and "after." Reason enables discussion and debate (you can argue as to whether conclusion A follows from premise B). Revelation can only be accepted on faith, testimony, or direct experience.

A person who follows reason can be persuaded. A person who follows revelation undergoes more than a mental change. Such a person can only be converted. In the ancient world, Revelation was thought to have its source in God. Yet I wonder if "lived experience" today plays an analogous role to divine authority, turning a person's internal world or intuition about what's true into an inarguable premise (at least for the initiates).

Lived experience is not up for debate in the same way that Revelation is not up for debate. Of course, people do try to refute Revelation (see the disputations of the Middle Ages) and of course, people do try to refute lived experience. But the refutations fail because initiates and outsiders do not speak the same language—debate is for philosophers, not for the faithful who believe even when it is absurd. Reason can never refute Revelation. It can only show it to be Unreasonable. But Revelation never claimed to be, at its foundation, Reasonable.

The advantage of Revelation is the passion, loyalty, and commitment it inspires. The downside is that it fails to translate into a common language. Revelation draws a hard boundary between those who get it and those who don't—with no hope of appealing to the foreigner, the non-native (on their terms). Reason (in its ideal form) offers the promise of a public square, a semi-neutral meta-language, where people across cultures and belief systems must appeal to rules they can all accept. But reason cannot inspire the passion of specificity precisely because it is common. Additionally, Reason is always suspect, because outsiders can always say that what Reason claims as universal is just a covert form of particularist Revelation posing as self-evident.

My argument is not that we reject or accept "lived experience" as a source of authority. Rather, if we accept that it plays the formal role of Revelation today, we need to assess its strengths and weaknesses in light of the ancient tension between Reason and Revelation. And if liberalism is founded on the bracketing or rejection of Revelation as a source of social authority, enshrining religion as a private right, but not a public obligation—we should expect it to have a similar relationship to "lived experience." Whether this is good or not, I leave to you. Or perhaps you reject the analogy. In which case, I ask, how do you understand appeals today to "lived experience"?

Zohar's point resonates with my lived experience—my own personal narrative as a form of revelation. I actually argued in a separate essay, "Jewish Thought: A Process, Not a Text," that lived experience, according to the Hasidic thinker Rav Tzadok of Lublin, is the heart of mysticism. Similar in many ways to William James in his groundbreaking essay, "The Will to Believe" and further considered in his 1902 "The Varieties of Religious Experience," Rav Tzadok looks at the subjective mystical experience as the essence of *kabbalah*, the Jewish mystical tradition. But does it cohere with my reason and should that even matter?

Frankly, I think our lives are too rich, too nuanced, too multifaceted to reduce ourselves to either exclusively reason or experience. We cannot sacrifice the mystery of human experience on the altar of reasoned calculation, nor can we diminish truth to the subjectivity of what feels right. Learning to balance these two may be the summation of why human life is so unpredictable, impossible, and magical.

The Jewish people, the *medrash* explains, are compared to a dove (*Bereishit Rabbah* 39:8): in order to fly, a dove pushes off the ground with one wing and flies with the other. Rabbi Shmuel Phillips, in the introduction to his book *Judaism Reclaimed*, interprets this *medrash* as a plea for balance between reason and experience. "The wings of the dove," he writes, "represent the two ways through which a Jew can legitimately approach and form a connection with God: intellectual cognition and an 'experience' of God…" In order to fly you need to use both.

I have long been enamored with Joshua Rothman's essays in the *New Yorker*. He deals with these big, meaty questions like "How Does Science Really Work?" and "What If You Could Do It All Over Again?" His essay on decision making introduced me to the works of Agnes Callard, a previous guest on 18Forty. In August, he wrote an article entitled, 'Why Is It So Hard to Be Rational?" For anyone lost at exactly what this rationality movement is all about, I would suggest starting with this article. Mr. Rothman writes how he tried to incorporate rationality into his own life. It wasn't easy.

> And yet rationality has sharp edges that make it hard to put at the center of one's life. It's possible to be so rational that you are cut off from warmer ways of being—like the student Bazarov, in Ivan Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons," who declares, "I look up to heaven only when I want to sneeze." …
>
> The realities of rationality are humbling. Know things; want things; use what you know to get what you want. It sounds like a simple formula. But, in truth, it maps out a series of escalating challenges. In search of facts, we must make do with probabilities. Unable to know it all for ourselves, we must rely on others who care enough to know. We must act while we are still uncertain, and we must act in time—sometimes individually, but often together. For all this to happen, rationality is necessary, but not sufficient.

It’s not enough to be rational, you need to be meta-rational ensuring you pay attention to how the very practice of rationality is applied in your life.

A close friend of mine, an avowed rationalist—and a darn good one—recently lamented about how he still feels a tinge of pain when he sees his kids doing something non-religious. It was a fascinating and heartbreaking admission. This friend was raised quite Orthodox, but left after concluding the tenets of faith could not be justified based on reason. His children are being raised outside of the community he grew up in. He told some of his story on a past episode. Yet, he wrote in a private online group (sharing here with his permission, of course), “I find that I often feel sadness when I notice one of my children (or myself/my wife) doing something that feels particularly non-religious.” I don’t doubt his commitment to reason for all the right reasons, what I personally find saddening is that his reasoning, in this instance, infringes on his experience. This is not a religious critique—he examined the issues and far be it from me to convince him that he’s wrong. I think in many ways the lament with which he is left is a critique in some ways of the process of reasoning that led him to these experiences. A commitment to rationality does not always translate into a fulfilling or meaningful life. (To be clear, I am not accusing my dear friend of having an unfulfilling or meaningless life—but, I think sometimes our commitment to a certain form of truth can obscure the more subjective beauty that life affords.)

In contrast, I have always found the article “The Overexamined Life is Not Worth Living” by Dr. David Shatz, an eminent analytic philosopher and observant Jew, to be a moving case for a more tempered balance for how reason shapes the contours of our life decisions. I mean, just the title of the article is brilliant: “The Overexamined Life is Not Worth Living”—a clever play on Socrates’ famous statement, “the ***un***examined life is not worth living.” Shatz tries to justify how his commitment to reason of the highest order translates into so many of the idiosyncrasies and oddities of religious life. Instead of integrating the two, he actually emphatically does not. Because, he explains, much of what makes life so wonderful cannot be justified solely through the measure of philosophical language or reason. He writes:

Philosophy has its place among the truly enjoyable, challenging, and edifying endeavors in our culture. But it is not the arbiter of all we think and do. What we do in our study and what we do in the rest of our lives are often not commensurate, because the study is the smaller room in life.

Philosophical reasoning, logic, and rationality all have an essential place in the way we approach life. But, as Rothman explains, “rationality is necessary, but not sufficient.” So much else that matters in life—most notably, love—can be nearly impossible to neatly parce through the lens of rationality. As Shatz explains, or perhaps admits, “If I love my family, you can’t argue me out of it by telling me that I *could* also learn to love a different family, or would have had I been born into one.” And maybe for some, that’s not all that satisfying. But the issues and decisions that are most essential to who we are can rarely be reduced to a clear logical chart or proof. Being human is sloppy, messy, and mysterious. As much as we try to embody the pristine logic of rationality, if we want to engage with the world and actually, like, be human, there will always be a shadow of messiness hovering overhead. But if we use the full array of life’s gifts—rationality, mystery, awe, logic, and love—we can learn to fly.

An unexamined life—devoid of the objective gaze—can be fleeting and fanciful. Without rationality, we can become unhinged, without any formal metric or system to measure our convictions. But what happens after rationality? Is there an after? And it is in this very tension—wedding essays and multiple choice, rationality and experience, unexamined and over-examined—into a rich and fulfilling life. And if life is in fact a test, consider this my essay submission entitled, “All of the Above.”