Jodie Scrimshaw
S3823172
Philosophy of Language 24 March 2025

Reasoning and Insinuation

[FI244PL]

Supervisor: Emar Maier and Merel Semeijn

Introduction

Reason is often seen as the hallmark of human thought – an abstract, deliberate process that guides us to truth. But what if this view is mistaken? In *The Enigma of Reason*, Mercier and Sperber argue that reason evolved not to help us think better alone, but to justify ourselves to others. This essay explores that shift in perspective and applies it to the phenomenon of insinuation, as analysed by Elizabeth Camp. Insinuation relies on the tension between what is said and what is implied, allowing speakers to communicate indirect messages while preserving deniability. By examining insinuation through the lens of Mercier and Sperber's account, I show that reason is used to evaluate implications and due to its intuitive nature, allows for deniability.

Reason

Traditionally, reason has been considered the ability that separates humans from other animals. While most animals rely on instincts and (complex) reflex arcs, humans are said to be able to make observations, reason about their meaning and consequences, and act accordingly. The ability to reason is considered vital in highly cognitive pursuits, especially science and mathematics, with logic as the epitome of abstract reason. It is contentious, however, that reason can be considered as an abstract ability that we can and do apply before making any decisions.

Mercier and Sperber propose a different approach to this quintessentially human trait in their 2017 book, The Enigma of Reason. In their approach, reason should not be considered something we do internally, before making important decisions, i.e. the traditional view of reason as an objective tool for arriving at truth or making sound judgments through logical thinking and critical reflection.

Rather, they argue that reason is inextricably linked to communication between individuals and can only truly be understood when considered from this context. The primary function of reason, they say, is not solitary thinking but argumentation – it evolved to help us justify our actions, persuade others, and evaluate the arguments of others within social interactions.

In Part III, Chapter 8 of *The Enigma of Reason*, Mercier and Sperber (2017) distinguish between two forms of reasoning: retrospective and prospective. Retrospective reasoning refers to the use of reason to justify or explain a decision or belief that has already been made or adopted. In contrast, prospective reasoning involves using reason to support or guide decisions or beliefs that are yet to be formed. As illustrated in Figure 1, these two forms of reasoning are conceptually distinct but

often overlap in practice. This essay will focus on justification as a central function of retrospective reasoning, and argumentation as the primary form of prospective reasoning, in line with Mercier and Sperber's claim that these are the most significant roles reason plays. Traditionally, however, both explanation (a form of retrospective reasoning) and inquisitive reasoning (a form of prospective reasoning) were viewed as the primary functions of reason. Explanation was often treated as a central intellectual activity, allowing individuals to make sense of their own beliefs and actions, while inquisitive reasoning was seen as a rational, truth-oriented process through which individuals arrived at sound conclusions through critical reflection.

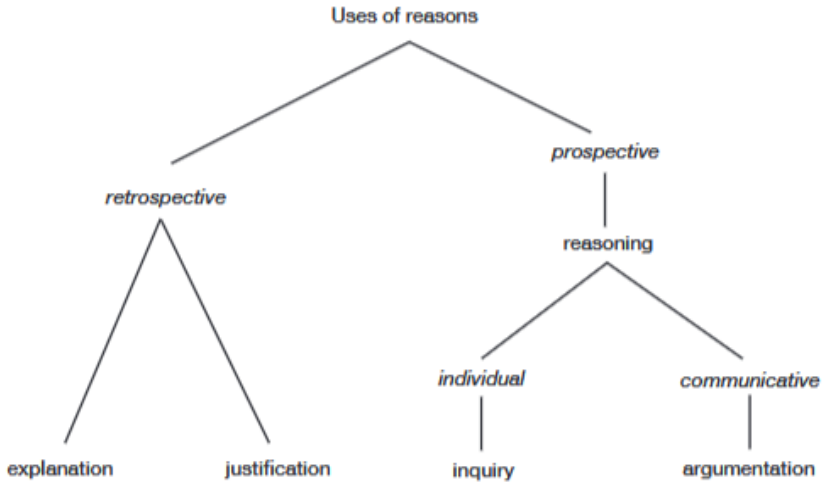

Figure 1: Retrospective and prospective uses of reasons (Hugo Mercier, 2017).

Mercier and Sperber argue that there is a straightforward reason to treat justification and argumentation reasoning within a single framework: the same reasons can serve both functions. A reason strong enough to justify a belief after the fact can just as well be used to support that belief beforehand. For example, if a reason is convincing enough to justify the belief that no one should smoke, that same reason could be used to persuade someone not to start smoking in the first place. The same goes the other way around – if a teacher helps students reason their way to the conclusion that there is no greatest prime number, the proof they followed not only leads them to that conclusion but also becomes a solid justification for it afterward.

Mercier and Sperber argue that most conclusions are formed intuitively, not through deliberate reasoning. Reasoning comes into play after the fact, primarily when we are asked to justify or defend those intuitions. In such cases, we generate reasons not by logical deduction, but through

further intuitive inferences – we intuit what would count as a plausible justification. Consider the following example: Mark and Mathilda spend several hours in a closed room while the weather outside remains sunny. When they step outside and see that the ground is wet, Mathilda immediately says, “It has been raining today!” This conclusion arises intuitively – she does not deliberate or weigh evidence, she simply feels that rain is the best explanation. If Mark then asks her why she thinks it rained, she may respond, for instance, that the ground is wet everywhere except under their car. However, this reason was not what originally led her to the belief – it is a justification produced after the fact, based on her intuitive sense of what makes the belief seem reasonable.

The case of prospective reasoning is slightly less obvious, as it often gives the illusion of being a deliberate, step-by-step process. However, as Mercier and Sperber (2017) explain, prospective reasoning still relies on the same intuitive mechanisms as retrospective reasoning. In many cases, we engage in inner dialog, imagining objections and responding to them as if we were already defending a belief—thus turning prospective reasoning into a kind of simulated justification. In more reflective forms of reasoning, what we perceive as deliberate thinking often involves intuitions about reasons and the conclusions those reasons support. As they put it, reasoning produces two outputs at once: a higher-order intuition that certain premises are good reasons, and a lower-order conclusion supported by those reasons. For instance, the intuitive sense that “the wet ground except under the car is a reason to believe it rained” is accompanied by the belief that “it rained.” The conclusion is not derived independently of the reason; rather, it is accepted because the reason feels intuitively convincing

Using Mercier and Sperber’s account, it becomes clear that we need to rethink how we define reason. Traditionally, reason has been seen as a process of deliberate, logical reflection aimed at reaching conclusions. But if reasoning is often used after a conclusion has already been reached, or functions through intuitions about what counts as a good reason, then this traditional definition fails to capture how reasoning actually works. What reason does, on their account, is not necessarily to generate conclusions through logic, but to connect conclusions with observations or premises that make them socially acceptable or persuasive. It is less about formal inference, and more about supporting beliefs with reasons that feel convincing – whether those reasons come before or after the belief itself.

In this light, we can define reason as "the ability to support conclusions using relevant observations." This definition reflects the broader argument that reason evolved for communication and coordination, not just internal problem-solving. With this working definition in place, we can now turn to consider how this function of reason plays out in real-world communication – particularly in the case of insinuation, as discussed by Elizabeth Camp.

Insinuation

In her 2018 paper, Elizabeth Camp theoretically explores insinuation through a philosophical lens. Insinuation is inherently tied to interpersonal communication and relies on what is not said to convey intention while maintaining deniability for the speaker (S). Camp considers the idea that the value of using insinuation is reaped by the speaker by being able to maintain deniability. The speaker can use insinuation to express ideas that might not be favorable or acceptable to say out loud, while maintaining deniability they would lack had they expressed themselves explicitly. Consider the following example:

(1) "I appreciate the effort you put into making dinner."

While one could interpret the above example as meaning what the words explicitly mean, if the statement is made after the cook asks what you think of dinner, they might well consider the hidden meaning that you did not enjoy the dish. By uttering 1, however, the speaker does not incur the social penalty for saying they didn't like the food.

Critical for insinuation to work is that the hearer (H) understands both the explicit meaning of the utterance (in the case of 1, that S appreciates the effort H put into dinner) as well as the implicit meaning of the utterance (in the case of 1, that S did not enjoy the dish H made for them). If H only hears the explicit meaning, the next time H makes dinner, S could be given the same dish they got before, which they did not like. If H, instead, only hears the implicit meaning, H might consider S to be rude and S will suffer the social penalty associated with telling an unflattering truth. The value of insinuation can be found in the tension between the explicit and implicit meanings, that is, in the uncertainty of whether the implicit or explicit meaning is the one intended by S. This tension allows S to get the implicit meaning across, while maintaining the ability to deny having

meant to say the implicit meaning. An example that better captures the importance of maintaining this tension is:

(2) Officer, I'm in quite a hurry, is there something we can do to resolve this issue quickly?

While the explicit meaning might simply refer to speeding up the process of writing a ticket, the implicit meaning might refer to offering the officer a bribe to let S go without writing a ticket at all. In this example, the consequence of only expressing the implicit meaning is more severe than in example 1, but the benefit of having the implicit meaning accepted is also greater.

For insinuation to work, the hearer, H, must be able to read both the explicit and implicit meaning from the utterance. To understand insinuation, we thus need to understand how H comes to the conclusion of what the meaning of the utterance is. The implicit meaning of 2 needs to be obvious enough where H (the officer) can understand that a bribe is being offered, but not so obvious that it can no longer be denied by S, thus incurring the penalty of having offered a bribe to an unresponsive officer. If H interprets 2 according to its implicit meaning, H might call S out on an unacceptable offer. If H interprets 2 only according to its explicit meaning, the value of the insinuation would be lost.

Reason in insulation

When we try to look for the role that reason, as described by Mercier and Sperber, plays in insinuation, we run into a problem. According to this account, there is no reasoning taking place before H either does or doesn't call S out on the meaning of the utterance. Let us look at example two again. If S utters 2 and takes it on its implicit meaning, either the officer may respond positively (and thus no deniability is necessary), or the officer responds negatively and calls S out for offering her a bribe. S, then, has the ability to respond with something along the lines of:

(2.1) "What? I did no such thing! I simply intended to speed up our interaction!"

If, as the traditional approach to reason proposes, reason starts from an observation and builds to a conclusion, the officer would now be able to state what about the utterance of S made her take it

on its implicit meaning. If the officer had taken 2 according to its explicit meaning, the same scenario would have played out (but only if she would have to explain her reasoning).

If the hearer (H) is able to clearly articulate reasons to support their interpretation of the speaker's (S) statement, then S may no longer be able to maintain plausible deniability. What protects the speaker, however, is that the hearer's interpretation is typically based on intuition, not a step-by-step process of traditional reasoning. The speaker's statement is first interpreted intuitively—whether it is taken at face value or understood as carrying an implicit meaning depends on the hearer's spontaneous judgment. If S then denies having intended the implicit meaning, H may try to justify their interpretation by giving reasons for why the utterance was understood in that way. According to Mercier and Sperber, such justifications come after the intuitive interpretation, not before. If H is able to produce a convincing justification, the implicit meaning becomes explicit, and S may have to bear the social consequences of having communicated something inappropriate. However, if H cannot clearly justify their intuition – if they cannot articulate concrete evidence for their interpretation – then S retains deniability. From this perspective, Mercier and Sperber's account offers a deeper understanding of insinuation: it works precisely because there is a gap between what is intuitively understood and what can be explicitly defended. This tension between implicit and explicit meaning is what gives insinuation its communicative power.

Conclusion

In this essay, I first explored an approach to reason that is more in-line with our place as animals, rather than endowing humans with an ability not shared with any other species. I described reason as a communicational tool that we use to support decisions we arrive at on intuition, when confronted by others and compelled to do so. We saw how these supporting reasons can be further arrived at using intuition alone. I then went on to consider why insinuation is valuable for a speaker looking to express an undesirable truth or idea and how it allows them to both express the undesirable meaning, as well as maintain their deniability in having expressed this meaning. Finally, we supported the idea that the effectiveness of insinuation depends on the inability of the hearer to directly support their interpretation of the meaning of the utterance.