

# Why doesn't reason always work?

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When we get into a disagreement with someone, why doesn't reason always work to resolve the disagreement?

In answering this question, let's start by assuming that both we and the other person sincerely wish to resolve the disagreement and that both of us are willing to discuss the relevant issues in an atmosphere of honesty and mutual respect.

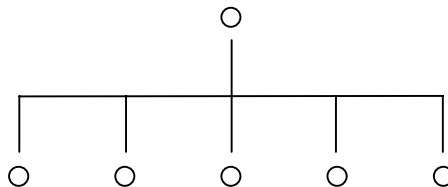
## Common ground

In such a situation, we seek to discover common ground with the other person — we seek to discover where we agree. Given this agreement, we seek to discover where our agreement ends, and we use reason to see if we can resolve the disagreement.

## Goal analysis

I think that the most promising method for resolving such disagreement is through **goal analysis**. In this strategy, we recognize that we are goal-directed creatures and that everything that we say and do is for the purpose of achieving goals. I think that the fundamental goals of human life are inherent in human nature and that all other goals are developed in order to achieve the fundamental goals.

Our goals are implicitly arranged in a conceptual hierarchy such that a given goal is implemented by realizing a set of sibling subordinate goals, and each of these goals, in turn, may have a set of sibling subordinate goals. The following figure illustrates the idea of a parent goal and its sibling subordinate goals.



We establish the subordinate goals in order to realize the parent goal.

For example, suppose that we are performing an action, such as playing the guitar, and we want to play a chord progression. The actions of our fingers in fingering the chords and in strumming the strings may be conceived in terms of a hierarchical structure of low-level finger movements that are organized into higher-level movements. Low-level movements pertain to pressing fingers on particular strings at particular frets, while a higher-level movement pertains to fingering a particular chord as a whole. Hence, the goal of fingering a given chord has five sibling subordinate goals specifying what each of the five fingers of the respective hand should do. A yet higher-level goal is to finger a progression of chords.

## Goal analysis and common ground

In resolving disagreement, how do we establish common ground with another person? We establish common ground by identifying goals on which we agree. For example, say that we agree on the parent goal in the figure. Given this, we seek to discover where our subordinate hierarchy of goals differs from

that of the other person, and we use reason to try to resolve such disagreement. Before addressing the problem of disagreement, let's explore the nature of goals a bit further.

### Automaticity and skill

As we develop skill, performance of subordinate goals becomes automatic, allowing us to think of fingering a C chord in playing the guitar, say, without having to think about what we do with our fingers to make it happen. Automaticity is required for efficiency and speed in all facets of human activity — thinking, speaking, acting. Hence, automaticity is required for skill in all facets of human activity. The concept of intuition refers to results produced by the automatic facility of our mind.

I explain automaticity in my book *Human Life*, Edition 2, in the chapter on how the mind works. Here's a webpage that presents the main ideas of the chapter:

<http://www.WhyHumanLifeMakesSense.com/Chapters/Index.php?pageid=08.%20How%20does%20our%20mind%20work>

### Acquiring goals: assimilation vs. reason

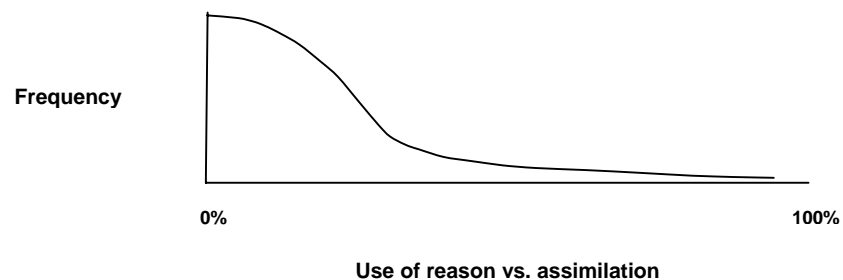
Of crucial importance is the fact that we don't start acquiring goals during adulthood when we are able to explicitly reason about them. Instead, we begin acquiring goals as an unborn baby as soon as our neural system is sufficiently mature, and at birth our process of acquiring goals takes off with very rapid development.

Initially, our goals as a baby are to satisfy our physical needs, as indicated by physical discomfort: hunger and thirst, need to evacuate waste, need for a diaper change, need for exercise, need for sleep. But as we are lovingly cared for, we also learn to understand loving affection and to return it.

Overall, during our childhood we assimilate goals from our social environment, making such goals part of our intuition, and we use reason to figure out how to achieve our goals — goals that we are born with or have acquired. Initially, our use of reason is not explicit, but as we acquire the ability to use language, we acquire the ability to explicitly reason about how to achieve goals. The ability to explicitly reason about goals acquires substantial maturity during adolescence, the time in life when a person may question goals that they had assimilated during their childhood, thereby producing an adolescent awakening.

Competent adults are conservative in modifying their goals, and the higher the level of a goal the lower the probability that they will modify the goal. This conservatism confers predictability and stability in a person's life. Nevertheless, adults do modify goals, especially when engaged in explicit learning situations, and we can characterize a person in the extent to which they are disposed to modify their goals based on assimilation vs. reason. I think that for most adults, assimilation is far more influential than reason, and the assimilation of goals occurs simultaneously with assimilation of identity as a member of a group that holds similar goals. The notable examples of this are joining a religious group, a political party, or a social movement while simultaneously assimilating the goals of the respective group.

The following frequency distribution characterizes this trait. The distribution represents a person by a single point as to the extent to which they are disposed to acquire and modify their goals based on assimilation vs. reason. The distribution says that most people acquire and modify their goals based



largely on assimilation, while a relatively small percentage of people acquire and modify their goals based largely on reason. This distribution is highly approximate and is based solely on my intuition.

### **Goals and knowledge**

We have seen that we start life with goals and that we continually create and modify goals as we live and mature. In this light, we are bound to ask what role knowledge plays in this process.

Knowledge is a tool that we use to guide us in achieving our goals. As explained in my book *Human Life*, Edition 2, knowledge is skill in predicting our observations. That is, knowledge serves to predict what we will experience in all forms of human experience: perception, thoughts, imagination, emotion, and will. Our ability to achieve our goals is a direct function of our ability to predict our observations — our ability to predict what will happen in the world around us and what will happen when we take specific action in the world.

How do we get knowledge? How do we acquire skill in predicting our observations? Knowledge is the result of reason applied to experience, so we get knowledge by obtaining experience and by reasoning about that experience.

Here's a webpage that presents the main ideas of the chapter on knowledge:

<http://www.WhyHumanLifeMakesSense.com/Chapters/Index.php?pageid=05.%20What%20exactly%20is%20knowledge>

### **Disagreement**

In terms of goal analysis, the reason for disagreement between two people is that they have different goals pertaining to the issue of disagreement. The question of interest to us, then, is as follows:

#### ***Why doesn't reason always work to resolve disagreement in goals?***

The first reason that reason doesn't always work is indicated in the frequency distribution depicted above. For most people, the modification of goals is largely based on assimilation, not on reason. But reason does play some role, especially in the acquisition of lower-level goals. For example, while our high-level religious goals may largely be based on assimilation, the techniques that we employ in performing a low-level skill, such as playing a musical instrument, will be based on reason informed by practice.

The second reason that reason doesn't always work is that knowledge is the result of reason applied to experience. So even if two people agree on some goal, they won't necessarily agree on all subordinate goals, which serve to implement the respective goal. Why not? Because their experiences in life are different and because they may use reason differently. In particular, people vary in the care that they take for reasoning accurately and systematically to eliminate contradictions.

As you can see, I answer the question about disagreement in terms of goal analysis. But, in general, two people who disagree might not even engage in careful goal analysis, so they may fail to resolve their disagreement because they fail to identify goals on which they disagree, as well as goals on which they agree.

### **Technical knowledge**

A skeptic may rebut that goal analysis doesn't apply to technical knowledge, where the only goal is to determine truth — objective knowledge.

But goal analysis does, in fact, apply because a scholar, scientist, inventor, or other technical person has goals pertaining to defending their reputation, earning money, advancing their career, and promoting ideas that they identify with, and these goals will bias their discussion of the subject matter.

### **Meeting format**

We discussed the topic of resolving disagreement in our August meeting, and we're continuing the topic now in order to pay closer attention to the following situations, as expressed by Mark, who originally suggested the topic:

***The other person has no interest in respectful resolution of the disagreement.***

***The other person has an equal or superior intellect but their ideas are demonstrably wrong.***

I encourage everyone to think of an example from their life in which disagreement wasn't resolved, along with an example in which disagreement was resolved. I think that our discussion will be more productive if we can refer to such examples. In addition, I encourage everyone to identify their highest-level goal in life, along with its immediate subordinate goals, which are the means for realizing the highest-level goal.

### **Prior meetings**

The topic of resolving disagreement relates to the October meeting on intuition, where we considered conscience, religious faith, and gender differences in cognitive preference. For intuition refers to results produced by the automatic facility of our mind.

The topic of resolving disagreement relates to the July meeting on the costs of love because a love relation is bound to run into disagreements. Disagreements impose a cost, and effort to resolve disagreements entails a cost. As a result, notable examples of disagreement that come to our minds may pertain to love relations.

The topic of resolving disagreement relates to the June meeting on belief. We saw that we can't directly determine what we believe, but we can influence what we believe by choosing the sources of information that we pay attention to. How do we decide on these sources of information? We choose information sources in order to realize our goals.