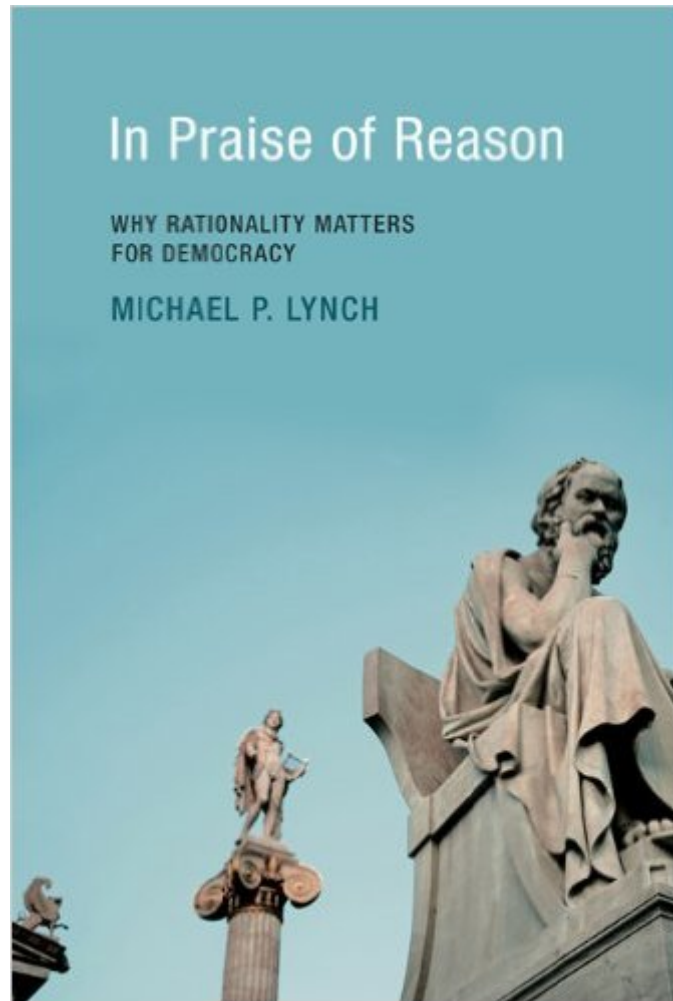


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# In Praise Of Reason: Why Rationality Matters For Democracy (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Why does reason matter, if (as many people seem to think) in the end everything comes down to blind faith or gut instinct? Why not just go with what you believe even if it contradicts the evidence? Why bother with rational explanation when name-calling, manipulation, and force are so much more effective in our current cultural and political landscape? Michael Lynch's *In Praise of Reason* offers a spirited defense of reason and rationality in an era of widespread skepticism -- when, for example, people reject scientific evidence about such matters as evolution, climate change, and vaccines when it doesn't jibe with their beliefs and opinions. In recent years, skepticism about the practical value of reason has emerged even within the scientific academy. Many philosophers and psychologists claim that the reasons we give for our most deeply held views are often little more than rationalizations of our prior convictions. *In Praise of Reason* gives us a counterargument. Although skeptical questions about reason have a deep and interesting history, they can be answered. In particular, appeals to scientific principles of rationality are part of the essential common currency of any civil democratic society. The idea that everything is arbitrary -- that reason has no more weight than blind faith -- undermines a key principle of a civil society: that we owe our fellow citizens explanations for what we do. Reason matters -- not just for the noble ideal of truth, but for the everyday world in which we live.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I couldn't wait for this book to come out and I tore through it once I got it. In some ways a sequel to Lynch's earlier book *True to Life*, this book has perhaps an even tougher job for the defense now is

reason as a whole, which requires an examination not only of the standards for belief but also all of the foibles about how we employ our standards for reason. At its heart, this is a book of epistemology but it is a rare one that brings the sometimes opaque questions that philosophers ask one another to the attention of the general reader. Lynch is funny and a gifted writer. He can take complex questions about Cartesian versus Humean skepticism, or the different theories of truth, and present them in language that is witty, accessible, and yet still does justice to the debate. The surprise at the end of the book is that he also presents us with a very "reasonable" theory of reason, which means that this book not only describes a sometimes complex debate, but also makes a contribution to it. I really enjoyed this book and recommend it highly.

This is an undersized book with less than 150 pages of text so it isn't a long read. Lynch defends epistemological reason with practical reason and while a surprising approach I found it to be fairly persuasive. This is definitely not a book for everyone but it isn't written in technical language so is accessible to us lay readers. There are parts of this book that are really good and I think it is a unique approach. I could have done with less of his Parallel Earth thought experiment, but that's not much of a problem as you can skim through it. This is definitely a thinking person's book and please take advantage of its "Search Inside" feature to preview it. Search Inside is a great feature which I wish was available on all books.

Author Lynch advocates the traits of scientific reasoning as those that should set the gold standard for public discourse in order to maintain a democratic society. Lynch explains that to give reasons for reason can be begging the question, as it is using reason to justify. So he explains that there is another basis for accepting scientific reason and takes the reader step by step through his logic. Frankly, a lot of the reasoning was hard for me to understand, but what I get is that science's way of arriving at conclusions - intersubjective, adaptable, repeatable and transparent, is the best way to engage in public discourse and keep the engine of democracy moving. This would be in stark contrast to the talking past each other, as well as the relativism that opposing sides ascribe to each others' views - whether they be reason or faith based. There is a lot to chew on in this book, not all of it easily grasped. But the main goal is clear that as a society we need to agree on method of discussion that gives fair time to both sides without devolving to shouting matches, name calling and demonization.

The book in review is brief, well-written, and very thoughtful. Lynch does an able job of explaining

what reason is, why we should reason, and how it is that we generally go about reasoning. He also mounts a solid argument for how we might/should ideally reason. What he does not do, to my thinking, is present a convincing argument for how people holding antithetical (if not openly hostile) epistemologies could reasonably bridge the divide between them. Lynch's thought exercise in this connection is interesting but not especially illuminating. I am entirely in sympathy with Lynch's own epistemological viewpoint, and his political views. As a fellow traveler, I found his arguments cogent and salutary. And yet, having read this book I have no better idea how I might find common ground with, inter alia, Biblical literalists or anti-evolution crusaders (nor how they, should they even wish to [therein lies a big part of the problem], might find common ground with me) than I did before. That's not to disparage Lynch or the book in review, however. The book is well-worth a few hours of your reading time.

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