

THE POLYSEMY OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL TERM REASON: SEMANTIC DIMENSIONS, CONCEPTUAL VARIATION, AND CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

The term reason functions as a central concept across epistemology, ethics, logic, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mind, yet its meanings remain notably heterogeneous. This article examines the polysemy of reason by relating lexical senses to the conceptual distinctions that emerge in philosophical theorizing. Drawing on cognitive-semantic accounts of polysemy and selected positions in the history of philosophy, the study identifies principal senses including reason as a faculty, reason as reasoning, reason as justification, theoretical reason, and practical reason. The analysis distinguishes lexical-semantic, terminological-conceptual, and contextual-pragmatic levels of interpretation. It argues that philosophical polysemy requires attention to both linguistic form and theoretical context rather than to lexical ambiguity alone, and that conceptual variation should not be automatically equated with lexical polysemy.

Keywords: Philosophical terminology, polysemy, reason, lexical semantics, conceptual variation, theoretical reason, practical reason.

Introduction

Polysemy refers to the coexistence of multiple related senses within a single lexical item and is standardly contrasted with homonymy, where formally identical expressions carry unrelated meanings (Tyler & Evans, 2003). Cognitive-semantic research treats polysemy as a structured network in which senses develop through conventional patterns of conceptual extension. However, a plausible conceptual link between two uses does not by itself establish that they constitute distinct lexical senses, since evidence from actual usage is also required. Philosophical terminology complicates this picture because specialized meanings often emerge through theoretical argumentation rather than through ordinary language use. A philosopher may restrict an established word to a technical sense, distinguish several forms of a concept, or redefine a term within a theoretical framework. Consequently, the analysis of philosophical polysemy must attend simultaneously to linguistic form and conceptual content, and it must remain sensitive to the difference between ordinary-language extension and technical stipulation.

Philosophical concepts are not identical to the lexical expressions that designate them, because one term may express different concepts across theoretical systems while a single concept may be designated by several expressions (Kant, 1998). To avoid conflating lexical polysemy with conceptual differentiation, three analytical levels should be distinguished. The lexical-semantic level concerns the conventional meanings associated with the word reason, whereas the

terminological-conceptual level concerns the specialized concepts designated by the term in philosophy. The contextual-pragmatic level concerns the interpretation activated by a particular occurrence in a text, and keeping these levels separate prevents the researcher from treating every philosophical distinction as evidence of lexical polysemy. Because philosophical terms circulate across multilingual and disciplinary communities, this contextual level is also shaped by broader processes of language and identity construction (Akhmadullina, 2026). The proposed categories are therefore analytical and provisional rather than a fixed dictionary taxonomy, and they may overlap in particular cases.

The first major sense of reason refers to the human capacity for rational thought, judgment, inference, and reflection. In this sense, reason is a faculty through which individuals evaluate evidence, identify relationships, draw conclusions, and assess claims. The usage is prominent in rationalist philosophy and appears in expressions such as human reason, the limits of reason, and the autonomy of reason. A faculty is a capacity that an individual possesses, whereas reasoning is an activity performed through the exercise of that capacity. The two are closely related but not interchangeable, as the expressions the limits of human reason and the process of reasoning illustrate. This distinction demonstrates how related meanings can arise through different conceptual perspectives on the same general phenomenon, especially when a philosopher distinguishes reason from other cognitive faculties such as understanding and sensibility (Kant, 1998).

A second sense concerns the activity of reasoning, namely the process of moving from premises, evidence, or accepted propositions toward conclusions. In this interpretation, reason is closely connected with inference, argumentation, logical consistency, and the evaluation of conclusions. Expressions such as the argument proceeds by reason rather than intuition and reason enables the evaluation of competing explanations emphasize the operation of rational thought rather than the possession of a cognitive faculty. A person may possess the capacity for rational thought without exercising it successfully in every situation. Conversely, an instance of reasoning is a particular activity that may be evaluated according to standards of validity, coherence, or evidential support. Whether a given occurrence should be classified as a distinct lexical sense depends on evidence from linguistic usage and the semantic framework adopted, since the activity sense is closely related to the faculty sense without being reducible to it (Broome, 2013).

A third major sense refers to a consideration that supports the acceptance of a proposition or belief, and in epistemology a reason may be evidence, an argument, or another consideration that provides support for a claim. This use is illustrated by expressions such as a reason to believe, good reasons for accepting a proposition, and reasons for rejecting a hypothesis. The term here does not denote the general faculty of rationality but identifies a consideration bearing on whether a particular belief should be accepted. A closely related practical sense concerns considerations that count in favor of an action rather than a belief, as when an obligation or anticipated consequence supports a decision. The distinction is not merely grammatical but concerns different kinds of normative assessment: epistemic evaluation concerns what one should believe, whereas practical evaluation concerns what one should do. Nevertheless, both uses share a structure in which a consideration supports a particular response to a question, and



this shared structure helps explain why the same lexical item is used across epistemic and practical domains (Scanlon, 1998).

Another important use of reason concerns the standards by which beliefs, intentions, decisions, and actions are evaluated. Here the term is associated with rationality, justification, coherence, or the requirements governing appropriate thought and conduct, as in the demands of reason and acting in accordance with reason. Contemporary discussions distinguish epistemic requirements governing belief from practical requirements governing intention and action, though the relationship between these standards remains contested. The expression theoretical reason refers broadly to rational reflection concerning knowledge, belief, explanation, and questions about what is the case. Practical reason denotes a capacity or process of deliberation about what to do rather than a particular consideration that supports an action. These compound expressions should not automatically be classified as independent lexical meanings of reason, since the adjective may simply restrict the domain of the noun while the general conceptual core remains recognizable (Kant, 1997).

Hume's philosophy illustrates the difference between reason as a cognitive process and reason as a source of practical motivation or normative authority. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume argues that reason discovers relations among ideas and matters of fact, while passions are central to motivation and the pursuit of ends. Reason can contribute to identifying facts, assessing causal relationships, and evaluating means to desired ends, but these functions do not imply that reason independently generates the motivations required for action. Kant provides a systematic differentiation within the conceptual field of reason by distinguishing its theoretical and practical employments while treating both as aspects of rational agency. These works demonstrate that the meaning of reason cannot be reduced to one undifferentiated notion of logical thinking, since its theoretical and practical employments have different objects, functions, and standards of assessment. At the same time, the distinction does not imply unrelated lexical meanings, because both employments remain connected to rational agency and are interpreted through broader theories of cognition and action (Hume, 2000; Kant, 1997). Contemporary philosophy further differentiates the concept of reason by examining the nature of reasons, their relationship to rationality, and their role in belief and action. Scanlon develops an account of reasons and value that emphasizes the considerations that count in favor of judgments and actions, while Broome investigates rationality and the requirements governing attitudes such as belief and intention. These discussions show that the semantic complexity of reason is not confined to historical changes in philosophical vocabulary but is sustained by ongoing theoretical debates. However, conceptual disagreement must not be confused with polysemy, since two philosophers may use the same term in the same broad sense while disagreeing about what reasons exist or what makes them authoritative. Such disagreements concern the nature of the concept rather than necessarily constituting different lexical meanings. The analysis therefore supports a contextual and evidence-based treatment of philosophical polysemy rather than an automatic equation of conceptual variation with lexical ambiguity (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2024).



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