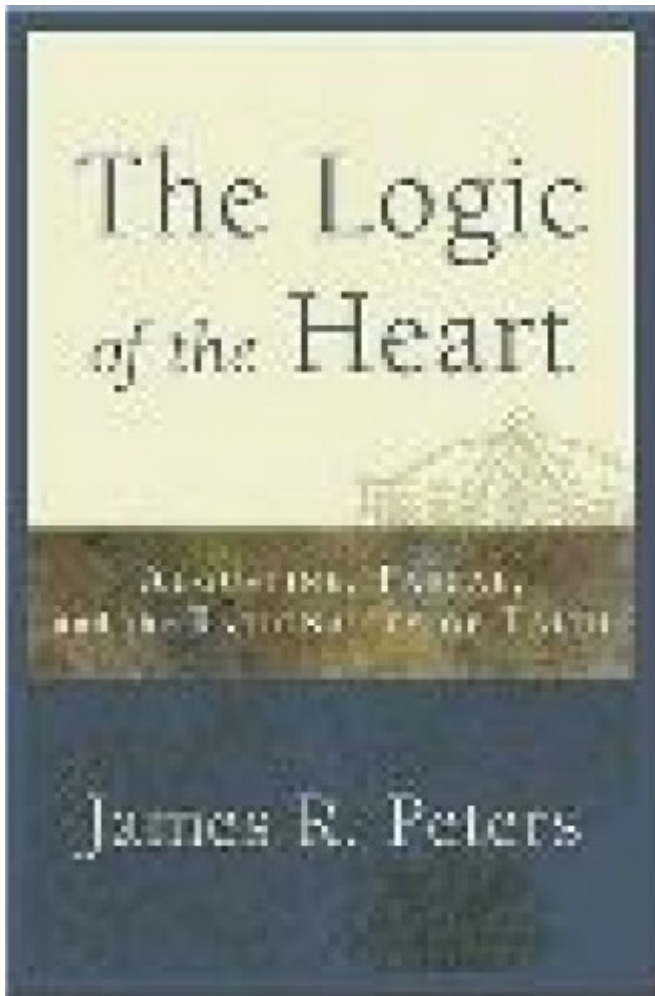


The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith

reviewed by [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith

James R. Peters
Baker Academic

Skepticism sells well at retail but not at wholesale. Retail skeptics can doubt everything from a weather report to the resurrection, but evidence that leads to truth may dissolve their doubt. Whole sale skepticism, on the other hand, grandly proclaims that there is no truth, and it's just the thing to get a philosopher fired up. Aristotle famously sought to refute the skeptic who declares that "there is no truth" by asking whether that statement is true. If it is true, then there is truth. If it is false, then there is truth. Hah!

James R. Peters is on the track of wholesale skepticism in *The Logic of the Heart*. Professor and chair of the philosophy department at the University of the South, Peters offers the reader an unhurried and careful seminar on the complex issues of reason, faith and skepticism. His aim is to demonstrate the rationality of faith by offering a precise understanding of faith's reason and reason's faith. Christian thinkers are named in the book's subtitle, but Peters also devotes considerable attention to the religiously skeptical David Hume. In the lengthy final section of the book, he draws together lessons from Hume, Augustine and Blaise Pascal to discuss the gains and losses of contemporary deconstructionism and neopragmatism in the work of such thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty.

The lurking villain in Peters's tale is René Descartes. In his *Meditations*, Descartes asked whether there is anything that absolutely cannot be doubted. He concluded that he couldn't doubt his own doubting, and that if he was able to doubt, he couldn't be nothing. Hence his famous statement "Cogito, ergo sum": I think, therefore I am. From that absolute truth, Descartes proceeded—with help from a benevolent God, whom he also discovered through pure reason—to deduce a system of the world.

Descartes's mode of philosophy, called foundationalism, was rejected by Pascal, Augustine, Hume and the modern deconstructionists. Foundationalists seek to ground truth in some rational intuition of absolute reality. The philosophers whom Peters champions—and critiques—hold that foundationalism fails. They claim that there is no rational way to eliminate wholesale skepticism if rationality consists of a theoretical, strictly logical knockdown argument. The alternative, however, is not skepticism. As Pascal stated in his famous paradox, "The heart has reasons that reason cannot know."

Hume offered a commonsense solution to wholesale skepticism. Strictly speaking, he argued, we cannot know anything beyond the impressions we gather with our immediate senses. We can't even know that the sun will rise tomorrow. "I am confounded," Hume wrote, "involv'd with the deepest darkness." The solution? "Most fortunately, . . . since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices . . . and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium." Hume went off to a game of backgammon and his doubts vanished; the solution to skepticism is thus not philosophical argument but practical life. Hume boldly concluded, "Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions." Rationality must be embedded in practical life, in our passions and desires.

Augustine and Pascal agree that truth must be grounded in desire; truth arises from human longing, not from pure reason. Pascal wrote: "We have an idea of truth which no amount of skepticism can overcome." Hume offers a commonsense, practical solution to skepticism, but the religious thinkers point to deeper desires and stronger passions. Peters sums up the proper role of reason for Christians: "Apart from the Cross by which we attain access to God's power and grace, reason cannot fulfill its proper function."

Given the basic affirmation that reason must be embedded in life, Peters expresses sympathy for deconstruction, which is totally opposed to any sort of foundationalism. But for deconstructionists, truth is a function of varied cultures; there is no overall grand narrative for humanity. Rorty asserted: "'The nature of truth' is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect 'the nature of man.'" At this point, modern deconstructionism parts company with Augustine and Pascal, for whom there is a universal human nature and a grand narrative of human life. Augustine addressed God: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Peters criticizes the modernists by suggesting that rather than rejecting grand narrative, they are simply substituting an alternative grand narrative. His refutation is analogous to Aristotle's challenge to the ancient wholesale skeptic: "There is no truth!" "Is that true?" "There is no grand narrative!" "Is that a grand narrative?"

Wholesale skeptics both ancient and modern seem to remain unpersuaded by logical contradiction, so in the long run philosophers tend to stop arguing with them and resort to mild forms of rhetorical abuse. Aristotle said that anyone who rejects his refutation of skepticism is a "vegetable" or, in an even milder Victorian translation, "like unto a plant." Peters also finally retreats to rhetorical rejection. Rorty and

company are “sophists” for whom truth is only a “communal artifact.” Despite the claim that modern skepticism liberates, it is “just another form of social domination” that ignores the reality of objective morality. Deconstructionism is “an illicit love affair with the modern harlot of human autonomy.” That’s worse than being a vegetable.

This retreat to rhetoric is not inconsequential. It suggests a problem with Peters enlisting Augustine and Pascal in his philosophical cause. Augustine and Pascal are not exactly philosophers in the mode. Augustine was trained in rhetoric, and much of his thought is contained in sermons, polemic and autobiography. Pascal’s literary mode is the powerful aphorism, not the precise argument. Adapting such discourse to philosophic use may subtly distort its true force and intent.

For example, Hume argues that resurrection is impossible because it violates the laws of nature. In a very precise philosophical critique, Peters counters that while it is true that resurrection violates the laws of nature—otherwise it would not be a miracle—that does not prove that God cannot bring about an event by supernatural agency. The problem with Peters’s argument is that it may miss the religious meaning of Christ’s resurrection. It is not just that resurrection could be caused by supernatural agency, but that the content of Christ’s resurrection is itself supernatural: it changes the whole world. God can raise the dead, but the reviving of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus are radically different events.

Augustinian rhetoric and Pascalian paradox stir our passions to make us new beings in Christ. Christian faith does not just supply a practical truth that theories can’t quite attain; faith confronts us with Jesus, who says, “I am the Truth.” Where in a rationality analysis does that truth reside?