Introduction

Enlightenment rationalism may be said to have been birthed with the writings of Francis Bacon and René Descartes, and to have come to self-awareness in the works of the French philosophes (e.g., Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet, and d'Alembert), and their allies, such as Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Paine. But almost contemporaneously with the birth of this movement, it attracted critics.

The aim of this project is to provide an overview of some of the most important of the many critics of Enlightenment rationalism. The essays on each thinker are intended not merely to offer a commentary on that thinker, but also to place him or her in the context of this larger stream of anti-rationalist thought. So, while this volume is not a history of anti-rationalist thought, it may contain the intimations of such a history.

Some may wonder at the mixed bag of thinkers we address: poets, philosophers, economists, novelists, political theorists, urbanists, and philosophers. But there is unity in this diversity. Although these diverse authors worked in a variety of forms, they all sought to demonstrate the serious limitations in rationalism's description of the human situation. It is our hope that surveying the variety of perspectives from which rationalism has been attacked will serve to clarify the difficulties the rationalist approach to understanding faces, rather than dispersing our critical attention. In other words, we hope that these divergent streams flow together into a river, rather than meandering out to sea like the channels of a delta.

The subjects of the volume do not share a philosophical tradition as much as a skeptical disposition toward the notion, common among modern thinkers, that there is only one standard of rationality or reasonableness, and that that one standard is or ought to be taken from the presuppositions, methods, and logic of the natural sciences. In epistemology, this scientistic reductionism lends itself to the notion that knowing things consists in conceiving them in terms of law-like generalizations that allow for accurate predictability. In moral philosophy, scientism leads to the common notion among modern ethicists that any worthy moral theory must produce a single decision procedure that renders moral action uniform and predictable.

The form of scientism that is the object of our collection of thinkers' criticism is often associated with the historical period referred to as the Enlightenment and Enlightenment rationalism has come to be a shorthand expression for such reductionism. We are using the term Enlightenment rationalism in its broader and less-than-historically-accurate sense to refer to any modern attempt to restrict the concept of rationality to something like a quasi-mathematical logic, and, in so doing, the objects of criticism include Bacon and Descartes, among other pre-Enlightenment figures. Thus we also include a pre-Enlightenment critic of such thinkers, Blaise Pascal.

While the subjects of the volume are united by a common enemy, the sources, arguments, and purposes of their critiques are extraordinarily various and, though they often overlap, they just as often contradict one another. There are epistemological pluralists like Gadamer, Oakeshott, and Berlin who draw sharp distinctions between scientific, aesthetic, historical, and modes of discourse, and, thus, reject the Enlightenment rationalists' claims concerning the superiority of scientific explanation. There are religious believers like Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky

who criticize the ‘faith’ in human reason exhibited by Enlightenment rationalists (this group of critics tend to be Augustinian Christians). There are aesthetes like Eliot, Lewis, and Kirk who decry the insipid and desiccated conception of humanity put forward by the Enlightenment rationalists. There are critics of modernity itself like Heidegger and MacIntyre who deplore not merely Enlightenment rationalism, but other forms of modern rationalism associated with many of the other subjects of this collection. And there are those who attack the Enlightenment rationalists’ understanding of scientific activity and explanation, like Polanyi, Hayek, and Quine.

We have not included thinkers who are deeply skeptical of any form of human reason, and who view human interactions almost solely as the result of power relations or unconscious desires, motives, or beliefs. So the variety of postmodern thought that owes such a great debt to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud is not included (Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, et al.), though all are highly critical of Enlightenment rationalism.

Having looked at our criteria for selecting what thinkers to include, let us now turn to the thinkers themselves. The first of our critics of Enlightenment rationalism, **Blaise Pascal** (1623–1662), wrote before the Enlightenment proper was even under way. (Although, of course, it is generally nonsense to declare that "The Age of X" began at some precise date, the Enlightenment is generally said to have begun in the late 17th or early 18th century.) Nevertheless, important progenitors of Enlightenment rationalism, such as Bacon and Descartes, had already been busy laying its groundworks.

[Remarks on Daniel Mahoney's piece.]

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) is the next thinker we tackle. Burke, writing a century and more after Pascal's death, saw Enlightenment ideas as leading to the French Revolution, of which he is the most famous critic.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) ...

While de Tocqueville focused on the political and social consequences of the spread of Enlightenment ideas, **Søren Kierkegaard** (1813-1855), often considered to be the first existentialist philosopher, turned his attention primarily to the theological and ethical conflicts following in their wake. Nevertheless, he addressed political matters as well, as noted by Rob Wyllie in his essay on the Dane: "Kierkegaard is a famous critic of rationalism, though less well known as a critic of *political* rationalism" (p. 1). Kierkegaard condemned what he saw as his era's tendency to replace decisive action with political "talkativeness, chatter, or chit-chat" (p. 6): such a trend betrayed a lack of passion on the part of citizens. The age, he believed, "lets everything remain, but subtly drains the meaning out of it" (K. quoted on p. 8). Wyllie draws a connection between the object of Kierkegaard's critique and the concept of the rationality of the public sphere in the work of Habermas. As Wylie portrays it, Kierkegaard could be viewed as offering a century-in-advance takedown of Habermas. For Kierkegaard, politics, at least as practiced in his age, was a distraction from fixing one's own character. The rationalism he criticizes consists in the belief that endless palaver about the "reasons" such-and-such should occur can take the place of true, ethical commitment to an ideal of life.

Although the Enlightenment was birthed in Western Europe, Enlightenment ideas spread both westwards, particularly to the new nation of the United States, and also eastward, into Russia. **Fyodor Dostoevsky** (1821-1881) ...

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) ...

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) ...

Corey Abel grapples with the conundrum of how **T.S. Eliot** (1888-1965), one of the paradigmatic “modernist“ writers, could also have been a staunch defender of tradition. Abel quotes Eliot arguing, “The sound tree will put forth new leaves, and the dry tree should be put to the axe”, and describes the quote as “a vivid image of Eliot’s modernism” (p. 5).

So, for this paradigmatic modernist, what, exactly, is the value of tradition? Abel interprets Eliot as believing that, “from the poet’s standpoint, a tradition provides buoyancy… Tradition, for the artist, is the gift of form” (p. 6). When poets are writing within a tradition, each poet has little to do.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) ...

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) ...

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), notes Steven Knepper, hosted one of the most important salons in Paris both before and after the Second World War, attended by Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Levinas, and others. As such, he influenced several major intellectual movements, such as Catholic personalism and existentialism. He would doubtlessly be better known today if he had chosen to align himself with some such movement, and adopt a “doctrine“ which could have “followers.”

However, Knepper argues, “Marcel worried that such labels distort or lead to assumptions” (2). Philosophy should be an open inquiry that did not imprison him in a “sort of shell” (2).

Nevertheless, an attack on “technocratic rationalism” is a continuing theme in Marcel’s work.

Marcel’s concern with the “tyranny of technique”, which “drowns the deeper human in a conspiracy of efficiency and a frenzy of industry” closely echo Oakeshott’s criticism of the “sovereignty of technique.” The focus on technique tended to turn life into a technological problem to be solved, and other human beings into resources to be possessed for the assistance they might provide in solving life‘s problems. Mystery is drained out of existence:

death becomes a tricky biomedical challenge to be handled as discreetly as possible, and love is a matter of achieving as high a “relationship rating“ as possible in some Yelp app for romance.

This solution to this problem, for Marcel, was not to abandon technique, or reject technological progress. Instead, he argued, “What I think we need today is to react with our whole strength against that disassociation of life from spirit which a bloodless rationalism has brought about” (14).

Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) ...

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), notes Luke Sheahan, may seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion in a book on anti-rationalists. After all, in a series of books, he used reasoned arguments to defend the Christian faith. But he believed that the effectiveness of such arguments “depended upon a deeper mode of knowing” (p. 1).

F.A. Hayek (1899-1992) ...

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) ...

Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) ...

Wendell John Coats, Jr. contends that the works of **Michael Oakeshott** (1901-1990) on rationalism, from the 1940s and 50s, “develop in detail the implications of a view of human knowledge and experience articulated initially in the more philosophic *Experience and Its Modes*” (p. 1). The earlier work sets out a case that arguments from various “modes“ of experience, such as science, history, and practical life, are mutually irrelevant to the advancement of other modes. For instance, a practical argument suggesting that we would be better off if we could travel faster than the speed of light should have no impact on a scientific case for whether or not such a thing is physically possible.

Coats says that “Oakeshott’s fundamental critique of [rationalism] as an approach to human activity and conduct is its partiality in the definition of ‘rationality’” (p. 3). The rationalist can only accept theories as rational, and rejects the rationality of concrete practices and the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place.

W.V.O. Quine (1908-2000) ...

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) ...

Russell Kirk (1918-1994) ...

Sanford Ikeda, in his essay on **Jane Jacobs** (1916-2006), ties her critique of rationalist urban planning to Hayek's analysis of the problems facing any such planner, whether they are attempting to plan a city or an economy. Ikeda notes how Jacobs understood rationalist urban planners to be under a similar egophanic spell as other prophets of utopia: "As in all utopias, the right to have plans of any significance belonged only to the planners in charge" (Jacobs, quoted on 7).

Ikeda makes clear the utopian character of Jacobs' targets in a series of sketches of their ideas; e.g., Ebenezer Howard is quoted as boasting that his schemes would create "garden cities" "in which all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life, withal the beauty and the light of the country, may be secured in perfect combination" (8). In common with all utopians, Howard seems to lack any sense that life might involve inescapable trade-offs: no, we can live in a place as lively as London *and* as serene as the Lake Country. One wonders that he did not also promise that his garden cities would be both as warm as the Congo and as cool as Antarctica! Similarly, Ikeda quotes Frank Lloyd Wright's claim that implementing his planned communities would "automatically end unemployment and all its evils forever" (9). And the arch urban rationalist, Le Corbusier, sought to create a "theoretically water-tight formula to arrive at the fundamental principles of modern town planning" (10). Again, the rationalist seeks to replace practical experience with a theory. As Ikeda concludes, all of the urban rationalists "do not appreciate the nature of a living city as an emergent, spontaneous order" (12).

Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-) ...

The following as written doesn't really fit in the intro, but I think the ideas in it can find their place in the intro, so I leave it here for the moment:
As I think I have shown in my work on Oakeshott, his political criticism of rationalism sprang directly from his philosophical view of the modes of experience: the rationalist in politics was guilty of an *ignoratio elenchi*. And when Eliot writes of men "dreaming of systems so perfect that no one has to be good," he is expressing in poetry what Oakeshott expressed in verse.