

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. In his chapter on **Edmund Burke** (1729-1797), Ferenc Horcher argues that Burke's critique of the French Revolution focuses specifically on the inappropriateness of the philosophes' and revolutionaries' attempt to apply an abstract and rationalistic blueprint to the messy complexities of French political life. According to Horcher, Burke is justly understood as the founder of a political tradition, which might with good reason be labelled as British conservatism. One of the central features of Burke's position is his skepticism about the usefulness and applicability of a theoretical abstractions in political affairs. Horcher notes that Burke's criticism of the French philosophes centered on the practical destruction caused by their 'social engineering,' and on the ever more radical (and more bloodthirsty) revolutionary regimes created by such 'social engineering.'

Further, Burke argued that the nature of politics is exceedingly complex. Thus, the optimism characteristic of enlightened intellectuals when they enter the political arena is not only logically unfounded, but also politically counterproductive and often pernicious. Horcher focuses his attention on those parts of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which helped to identify a less optimistic, but more realistic view of politics, which has characteristic British traits, the most significant of which is a belief in the rational values of such non-instrumentally rational political institutions as precedents, custom and political experience.

Travis Smith and Jin Jin discuss **Alexis de Tocqueville's** (1805-1859) nuanced criticism of rationalism by examining his views on the relationship between philosophy and politics in *Democracy in America* and *Recollections*. According to Smith and Jin, Tocqueville claims that the preservation of liberty requires a new political science to educate the ineluctably emerging democratic social state. Tocqueville argues that the ascendant political science of the enlightenment, which aims at wholesale social engineering, is actually an unscientific and partial ideology that is oblivious to certain aspects of the human condition and obliterates other parts.

For Smith and Jin, Tocqueville's recognition that both ethics and politics require educated virtue means that reason and political liberty are inherently complementary. However, Tocqueville notes that the kind of rationalism espoused by the French philosophes depends on assuming ever more control over people's lives. Smith and Jin observe that Tocqueville witnessed at firsthand multiple attempts to implement rationalistic systems following the end of the Old Regime, and his more human science explains why theirs necessarily fails to produce the supposedly just society or free people they are purportedly designed to construct while succeeding instead at fostering ever more dehumanizing injustices.

According to Smith and Jin, Tocqueville insists that political freedom requires virtue, and virtue requires reason, but reason is best developed when human beings are given the freedom to meet their greatest potential. Politics dominated by uncritical veneration of reason, especially an Enlightenment conception of reason that is simultaneously excessive and deficient, undermines virtue and freedom alike.

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 Wyllie 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.

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Justin Garrison offers an account of **Friedrich Nietzsche's** (1844-1900) critique of Enlightenment rationalism which is unique in this volume in that, according to Garrison, Nietzsche rejects not only Enlightenment rationalism, but rationalism *tout court*. Garrison also offers Thomas Jefferson, instead of the French philosophers, as the primary foil. Of course, Jefferson was a great admirer of the philosophes specifically and the Enlightenment generally. As Garrison notes, Thomas Jefferson consistently proclaimed the innate goodness and rationality of human beings, and believed that governments propped up by irrational claims of authority, particularly the "monkish ignorance" of religious authority, had subverted these qualities too often. For Jefferson, a new science of politics, one grounded in reason rather than superstition, offered hope because it allowed for the discovery of a rational foundation for government worthy of the people it would serve.

According to Garrison, Friedrich Nietzsche would find Jefferson's political thought naïve and unphilosophical. Nietzsche argued instead that Enlightenment rationalism did not inaugurate a break from the religious past so much as it re-packaged pre-existing ethical and political beliefs in language stripped of many theological and metaphysical associations. Thus, modern rationalism was no new thing under the sun, but was instead was an example of a serious problem Nietzsche already identified in Christianity, that is, nihilism. Garrison explores Nietzsche's understanding of reason, morality, equality, Christianity, and democracy, and applies Nietzsche's analysis to the same elements of Jefferson's political thought. By borrowing Nietzsche's hammer to "sound out" Jefferson's mind, Garrison suggests that Jefferson's oft-celebrated democracy of reason is tinged with misanthropy and world hatred. In other words, such a vision is a manifestation of the ascetic ideal and thus is ultimately nihilistic. Because many see Jefferson as a paradigmatic figure in the American Founding, even as an incarnation of the American spirit, the chapter has broad implications for interpreting a fundamental dimension of the American political tradition.

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.

Daniel Sportiello, in his chapter on **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951), examines how Wittgenstein's later philosophy brings into question many of the assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism, especially its focus on quasi-mathematical reasoning. According to Sportiello, the focus of Wittgenstein's critique of rationalism was his rejection of the thesis that there is a single right way to do whatever it is that we do, and that way can be discovered by the use of an abstract faculty called reason.

Sportiello observes that, for Wittgenstein, our words and deeds are justified only by the rules of particular language-games, but these language-games are themselves justified only insofar as they meet our needs; certainly none of them need be justified by reference to any of the others. In claiming this, Wittgenstein is something more than a pragmatist since he believes that the rectitude of all of our discourse is a matter of its use (for whatever ends we happen to have). Taken together, our language-games constitute our form of life, though this form of life is not entirely arbitrary, as some of its features can be explained by reference to our nature. Nonetheless, Sportiello notes that Wittgenstein means that our form or forms of life could be different in many ways. Indeed, the forms of life that have characterize human communities have been and will continue to be marked by significant differences. Thus, for Wittgenstein, the failure of Enlightenment rationalism lies in its attempt to reduce the variety of language games and forms of life to single abstractly rationalized unity. Sportiello suggests that Wittgenstein reminds us that, on some level, we all know this. Philosophy at its worst is the attempt to forget it; philosophy at its best is, therefore, the attempt to remember it.

The work of **Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976), Jack Simmons says, can be understood largely as a critique of scientism. As he writes, "Science sees the world scientifically and Heidegger contends that this method of revealing the natural world conceals non-scientific ways in which the world might appear to us, ways that might represent a more authentic encounter with the world (2).

"Natural scientific reasoning is itself part of the historical dialectic. It is not a value neutral tool for understanding reality, but is itself too an object of study in ontology..." (6)

Heidegger wrote: "Although ceaselessly determining all things, this 'in totality' nevertheless remains something indeterminate and undeterminable, and is thus generally confused with what is readiest at hand and most easily thought of" (quoted on page 15).

"One way to understand Heidegger's critique of enlightenment reasoning is to think of it as a critique of a utilitarian logic, a science that sees the world of objects as resources, and ideas as tools, and the combination of the two as machines to satisfy needs" (16).

"The reductionist approach of modern, scientific reasoning, make it well-suited to a utilitarian worldview Heidegger calls technological thinking" (16). Note the similarity to both Marcel's and Oakeshott's attacks on "the tyranny of technique".

According to Simmons, the relevance of Heidegger's critique of technological thinking is demonstrated by "Our current affinity for STEM education, wedding science to technology, engineering and mathematics, in order to satisfy the needs of the community as determined by a reductionist, economic theory, and reducing the student to an economic resource" (17).

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).

Charles Lowney's essay on **Michael Polanyi** (1891-1976) argues that Polanyi's work demonstrates that the Enlightenment's standards for knowledge contain distortions that could have destructive effects in a variety of ways. According to Lowney, Polanyi was a sympathetic critic of the Enlightenment, which makes sense given Polanyi's own success as a natural scientist. Polanyi admired the Enlightenment's political ideals, but its critical rationalism led to a misunderstanding of the character of science, which Polanyi called 'scientism'. Lowney notes that, for Polanyi, this false 'scientism' tended to reject the objectivity of anything not based on physics and chemistry, thus relegating human values to the realm of the purely subjective.

Lowney claims that Polanyi's post-critical philosophy revises Enlightenment standards to more accurately reflect the limits of knowledge and how science actually proceeds. This involves critiquing (1) the viability of complete objectivity, (2) the adequacy of Cartesian explicit analysis to simple self-evident truths, (3) the concomitant reductive analysis of reality to smallest physical components, and (4) reductive dichotomies between mind and matter, and between fact and value. Polanyi accomplishes this with his conceptions of (1) personal knowledge, (2) tacit knowing, (3) emergent being, and (4) discovery and indwelling. For Lowney, Polanyi's work undermines the traditional conception of scientific knowledge, arguing instead that science moves toward truth and better contact with reality by using the same tools of practical knowing that produce understanding in those cultural and religious traditions that are open to dialogue and discovery. Values, and not just physical facts, can be real discoveries about the world. Polanyi's post-critical epistemology thus provides a non-skeptical fallibilism that opens possibilities for understanding that go beyond simple dualisms and reductionism, forestalls a regression into nihilism, and renews hope in human progress.

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) ...

“A necessary feature of concrete orders is that they always have more dimensions and features to them than we have apprehended. They are irreducibly complex. Abstract orders, by contrast, are the simplified models and categories that we use to make sense of our experience and communications with others” (6).

In his chapter on **Hans-Georg Gadamer** (1900-2002), Ryan Holston explores Gadamer’s ambivalent relationship to Martin Heidegger (the subject of its own chapter in the current volume) and the unusual way in which he combines Heidegger’s historicism with the tradition of Western metaphysics that was the very target of Heidegger’s critique in his own critique of Enlightenment rationalism. According to Holston, while acknowledging his deep indebtedness to Heidegger, Gadamer moves beyond Heidegger’s relativistic historicism to a position that is more deeply indebted to the long tradition of Western philosophy beginning with Plato and Aristotle.

For Holston, Gadamer’s achievement is to offer an alternative account of human epistemology which grounds human knowledge in the facticity of human ontology. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics collapses the fact-value division which is characteristic of Enlightenment rationalism, thus, combines a descriptive and normative epistemology. Holston suggests that Gadamer has described what is fundamental to any true, authentic, or genuine interpretation/understanding. To put it differently, one might say that he is describing a normatively positive category of human experience which encompasses understanding the human world in a way that abstract ‘scientism’ cannot.

According to Holston, Gadamer’s critique of modern rationalism arises from his concern about the forgetfulness of being, and he sees that as characteristic of scientific inquiry (understanding “from a distance”) in which the observer is conceived as not part of the reality being observed. By calling attention to the ubiquity of ‘application’ to present circumstances that is part of all understanding, Gadamer aims to remind us of our continuous involvement in a reality that transcends both ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of interpretation.

Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) is a hard theorist to summarize, as his 34 volumes of political philosophy include “multiple changes in focus and emphasis,” according to Michael P. Federici (1). In analyzing Voegelin for this volume, Federici notes that he was not focused in his writing with “the Enlightenment itself but a broader intellectual genealogy of which the enlightenment was a part” (1). Voegelin was concerned

“primarily with the rise of political religions [which were] the outgrowth of existential closure to the truth of existence” (1). Enlightenment rationalism was “interesting to Voegelin in so far as they contributed to the development of... the western crisis of order that inspired his work” (1).

“Enlightenment thought has been described as the religion of reason and the religion of humanity, language that conveys Voegelin’s characterization of the enlightenment as apostatic revolt” (2).

Similarly to Michael Oakeshott, Voegelin understood Enlightenment rationalism to be irrational, “because it is reductionistic” (4). For Voegelin, Federici writes, Enlightenment rationalism, following the lead of Voltaire, takes “a part of human experience... the animal basis of existence... as its whole” so that “man’s participation in transcendent reality is eliminated from consciousness” (5).

“Removing consciousness of... transcendent structures from the life of human beings and human civilization eliminates the very source of order on which the ends of politics depend” (6-7). As Federici puts it, “a just political and social order, including rational discussion on which it depends, are only possible if human beings are open to transcendent reality” (8).

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) ...

Nathaneal Blake's essay on **Russell Kirk** (1918-1994) seeks to place him in the context of the American conservative movement of the mid-twentieth century. Blake claims that Kirk's great achievement lies in his consistent insistence on the fundamental limitations of human rationality, especially when that rationality is applied to social or political activity. Blake notes Kirk's Burkean opposition to schemes for collectivizing property and centralizing power, and connects that opposition to his contention that such rationalist plans failed to account for the limits of human knowledge and goodness. When implemented, they brought misery to millions. Against the rationalist confidence of the central planners, Kirk set tradition, which he saw as a repository of human experience and the tried and true wisdom of the past.

Blake also notes that Kirk's most famous work, *The Conservative Mind*, brought about a revival of interest in Edmund Burke and solidified Burke's reputation as the founding figure of modern conservative political thought. According to Blake, Kirk also offered unique insight into Burke's blend of natural law thinking and historical consciousness, and this blend offers valuable insights into the real working of political communities. There are real moral obligations upon us, but the mystery of human existence prevents us from delineating once and for all a perfect system of moral philosophy, or an ideal political system. Finally, Blake points out that, for Kirk, truth, whether moral, cultural or political, is apprehended as much by the imagination as by reason.

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).

In his chapter on **Alasdair MacIntyre** (1929-), Kenneth McIntyre (no relation) examines MacIntyre’s critique of modern rationalist moral philosophy and his attempted resuscitation of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. According to McIntyre, Alasdair MacIntyre offers not only a critique of Enlightenment rationalism, but a critique of modern moral philosophy as a whole. MacIntyre proposes a revitalization of Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics as an alternative to what he takes to be the desiccated and deracinated nature of modern deontology, utilitarianism, and emotivism.

McIntyre offers a sympathetic account of Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique of modern moral rationalism, emphasizing the importance of MacIntyre’s recognition of the teleological character of much of human activity, while also suggesting that his critique owes a great deal to other modern critics of moral rationalism, like Hegel and Collingwood. McIntyre also suggests that the primary weakness of MacIntyre’s version of virtue ethics is that it does not adequately answer the challenges posed by modern moral pluralism to a unified conception of the human telos.

“What went wrong during the enlightenment was that philosophers jettisoned the anchor that tied moral rules to substantive human results, leaving practical reasoning and moral judgments unmoored to any conception of human flourishing” (11).

As McIntyre notes, for MacIntyre, as for Oakeshott, the rationalist conflates “practical and theoretical/scientific reasoning” (11). For MacIntyre, this is an outcome of the modern rejection of Aristotelian teleology.

“Thus, MacIntyre offers an account of human practical knowledge which rejects the modern scientific account of human reason as primarily instrumental and technical” instead of insisting that “it is acquired only by an engagement in the variety of specific human practices themselves” (14). Since to know a practice is to understand the history of that practice, a notion MacIntyre adopts from R.G. Collingwood, there is an inherently traditional aspect in human rationality. He claims that “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought” (quoted on 15).

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.