

# 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 Benjamin Franklin, 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 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). Wylie 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) ...

**T.S. Eliot** (1888-1965) ...

**Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951) ...

**Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976) ...

**Gabriel Marcel** (1889-1973) ...

**Michael Polanyi** (1891-1976) ...

**C.S. Lewis** (1898-1963) ...

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

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

**Eric Voegelin** (1901-1985) ...

**Michael Oakeshott** (1901-1990) ...

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

**Isaiah Berlin** (1909-1997) ...

**Russell Kirk** (1918-1994) ...

**Jane Jacobs** (1916-2006) ...

**Alasdair MacIntyre** (1929- ) ...

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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.