# Critics of Rationalism: Book Description

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In the first half of the twentieth century, the rationalist tide had reached its high mark. The arts, so it was held, were to be revolutionized according to rationalist precepts. In architecture and city planning, rationalism would sweep away that unnecessary clutter of old prejudices that restrained traditional architecture and customary urban organization and build the modern, functional buildings and communities that people truly needed. Child-rearing also was to be brought into accord with âscientificâ principles. Traditional agricultural practices were to be rejected and replaced by "scientific" agriculture, and a similar change was to sweep away long-standing principles of forest management. And, with the Soviet Union seen as setting the example of a shining city on a hill, society as a whole was to be transformed into a utopia by tossing aside all attachment to atavistic customs and ancient moral relics and proceeding to design social affairs from first principles.

But World War II, the Holocaust, the Gulag, the failure of urban renewal projects, the widespread diseases plaguing "scientific" forests and agricultural projects, and other dismal outcomes of the rationalist program have considerably dimmed its popularity. However, the evidence of those practical failures would not have been as convincing as it wasâperhaps it was the case that we just had not found the proper rationalist program yet?-- if not for the existence of a theoretical diagnosis of the malady. That diagnosis was provided by a number of thinkers in the twentieth century. The aim of this collection is to compare and contrast the ideas of some of these leading critics of rationalism: Eric Voegelin, Michael Polanyi, F.A. Hayek, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, Michael Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre and others. While each can be seen as a critic of rationalism, were they each attacking the same thing? In what senses did their analyses overlap, and in what senses did they differ? Clarifying these issues will provide important insights into this major intellectual trend of the past century.

"Rationalism" is an unfortunately overloaded term. In mainstream analytical history of philosophy, it is often used as a contrast class to "empiricism." "Rationalists" believe that "pure reason" gives us the best guide to truth, while "empiricists" favor experience. In this usage, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz are "rationalists," while Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are characterized as "empiricists." While we do not object to this use of "rationalism," it has nothing to do with what we wish to address in this work.

Instead, the notion of "rationalism" we are dealing with is about the relationship of the abstract and the concrete. The common thread connecting our critics of rationalism is that each of them, in one way or another, criticized "abstract thought" not in and of itself, but insofar as it tried to replace "concrete thought," or tradition, or evolved moral rules, as a guide to how people actually should behave, or how they actually should evaluate certain proposals. (One thing that differentiates these thinkers is what exactly they contrast rationalism to.)

So, as a preliminary effort at clarifying what "rationalism" means, let us describe how we understand the "rationalism" that several of our thinkers criticize, if not explicitly, then at least implicitly.

* Michael Oakeshott

For Oakeshott, rationalism is first and foremost the attempt to dispense with practical know-how by substituting for it an abstraction drawn *from* practice. Such an attempt has no possibility of success, but it can nevertheless have pernicious consequences for those who try to pursue this "ideal." He sees rationalism as having an especially strong hold on politics, as the practitioners may not directly suffer the consequences of their faulty decision making themselves, but can impose those effects on others.

* F. A. Hayek

Hayek developed his critique of rationalism in the context of defeasing the socialist planner's pretense that he could "rationally" direct the entirety of a society's economic activity according to a plan worked out from purely theoretical knowledge of that society: no knowledge of "the circumstances of time and place" was necessary, according to the socialist planner. Unlike Oakeshott, Hayek tended to see the complement of rationalism as *non*rational, rather than as a different form of reason from abstract thought.

* Michael Polanyi

Polanyi did not employ the term "rationalism," instead drawing a distinction between knowledge that can be explicitly stated, and "tacit knowledge," or knowing how to do something, perhaps without being able to state in rules or abstract principles exactly what one knows.

* Eric Voegelin

Again, Voegelin does not use the term "rationalism" in the way that Oakeshott and Hayek do, and instead attacks "ideology." While there is some difference in meaning here, there is also common ground: to Oakeshott, "rationalism in politics" presents itself as ideologies. And Voegelin understands ideologies to be destructive, for one reason, because they denigrate "common sense" and pragmatism, so that we would sensibly see Oakeshott and Voegelin both as advocates of "practical politics" as opposed to ideological politics. Furthermore, Voegelin was a critic of "scientism," which is the main strain of rationalism.

* Ludwig Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's main rationalist target was the attempt to turn thought, and in particular philosophical thought, into pure formalism. He noted that, for instance, our ability to follow a rule cannot have a merely formal foundation, but rests in a way of life that gives meaning to the formal specification.

* Alasdair MacIntyre

MacIntyre's chief rationalist target is Enlightenment, or "encyclopedic," morality, which claims that it can work out moral behavior from abstract principles, without an "irrational" reliance on moral customs and habits. He constrasts that with moral thought that explicitly recognizes that it has roots in a tradition of moral reasoning.