# Introduction\*

“Rationalism” is an 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 tandentially related to what we wish to address in this volume. In fact, both share a central tendency extensively criticized by the thinkers we cover. As Mark Mitchell writes in his contribution to this work, “The twin streams of early modern philosophy, rationalism and empiricism, both rejected dependence on tradition and authority.”

Instead, the notion of “rationalism” we are dealing with is about the relationship of the abstract and the concrete. The “rationalists” being criticized by the thinkers we examine believe that thought is abstract thought, and that theory should be able to direct practice. 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 to what exactly they contrast rationalism.)

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

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s development of philosophical hermeneutics was a critical achievement against the rationalism that at times sought to dominate the social sciences and humanities in the last century. Gadamer defended the possibility of truth in these fields of human endeavor and knowledge, while denying that there was a definitive methodology for apprehending and articulating it. While he was sometimes accused of relativism (for instance, by Leo Strauss), he resolutely denied the charge, insisting that there was an alternative to scientistic rationalism and relativism. In his greatest work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argued that it is a mistake to try to establish scientific knowledge as the archetype of all knowledge, as this ignores the possibility for truth being known through the contingency and finitude of human existence, rather than in spite of it.

F.A. 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, for instance, Michael Oakeshott, Hayek tended to see the complement of rationalism as *non*rational, rather than as a different form of reason from abstract thought.

Aurel Kolnai strived to steer clear of both a Settembrinian creed of Reason and a Naphta-style cult of Irrationalism. His lifelong commitment was to phenomenological objectivism. He asserted that there is an objective moral order consisting of positive values that we are called to experience and make sense of in our moral life; and that there are prohibitions which make us alert to moral evil. He also stressed the importance of ordinary experience and common sense as antidotes to rationalism. His criticism of rationalism, especially robust in his writings on the utopian mind, aims at showing that a fully rational human world where everything is automatically rendered good, exterminates our moral capability of choosing between good and evil.

Alasdair 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 argues that, in fact, Enlightenment rationalism, rather than being the “tradition-free” pure reasoning that it purports to be, is itself a tradition, one that values continual argumentation over historically established ethical principles as representing the highest moral virtue.

For Michael 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 -- they have no “skin in the game,” as Nassim Nicholas Taleb would put it -- but can impose those effects on others.

Michael Polanyi did not employ the term “rationalism,” instead calling the trend he opposed “objectivism,” by which he meant the belief that the only true human knowledge was what was scientifically or logically demonstrable. That view is false, he argued, because all such “provable” knowledge rests on things we know but cannot prove. His argument here is similar to Wittgenstein’s that the ability to follow explicit rules rests upon a “way of life” that cannot be stated as a rule without invoking an infinite regress. It also bears a resemblance to Oakeshott’s contention that the rationalist cannot really act according to rationalist dictums, but will instead unwittingly fall back upon some tradition of behavior. Polanyi drew 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, in this regard making an argument closely akin to Ryle’s distinction between “knowing that” and “knowing how.”

Gilbert Ryle’s critique of rationalism focuses on the claim made by many modern epistemologists that all knowledge can be reduced to ‘knowing that...’ statements, while Ryle instead insists that there are multiple forms of knowledge that cannot be reduced to mere statements of fact. Indeed, questions about ‘knowing how’ to do something (e.g. hit a baseball, ride a bicycle, speak Spanish, play the mandolin, formulate a scientific hypothesis, etc.) are not reducible to statements of fact, at all. He associates the reductionist argument with a misguided notion about the relevance of the methods of the natural sciences to other forms of knowing.

Eric Voegelin does not use the term “rationalism” in the way that Oakeshott and Hayek do, and instead attacks “ideology” and “scientism.” While there is some difference in meaning here, there is also common ground: to Oakeshott, “rationalism in politics” presents itself as ideologies. In fact, a good definition of an ideology would be “an attempt to conduct politics according to a theory, rather than guided by practical reason.” 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, both Hayek and Oakeshott took scientism to be a form of rationalism, and a prevalent one at that.

Ludwig 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.

Having briefly reviewed what rationalism meant to the thinkers we discuss in this volume, let us take a brief look at each essay it contains.

Zoltan Balazs compares the moral thinking of the Hungarian philosopher and political theorist with that of Michael Oakeshott. Despite broad areas of agreement between the two -- both are, in some sense, conservative, and both are critical of the modern rationalist rejection of habit and custom -- Balazs finds that Kolnai provides something Oakeshott lacks: a robust, non-relativistic conception of the good, and a positive view of the role that a (non-rationalist) moral philosophy might provide in shoring up that conception.

Nathanael Blake contends that the work of Gadamer and MacIntyre shows us how to avoid the complementary dangers of rigid moral certitude and spineless moral relativism. Both Gadamer and MacIntyre (who has drawn heavily on Gadamer in his own writing) argue that accepting the historically contingent nature of all of our moral reasoning does *not* imply that any old moral position is just as good as any other one. As Blake has it, “Presenting Enlightenment rationalism as the alternative to relativism is a false dichotomy... Rationality does not entail leaping outside of our historical existence, but develops within it.”

Both authors examined by Blake hold that tradition, far from being an obstacle to reason, is, in fact, its necessary ground: we can reason at all only by having become educated in a tradition that instructs us in how to do so. As Gadamer notes, pure inertia is never enough to sustain a tradition; instead, it must be “affirmed, embraced, cultivated,” and the continuation of a tradition is every it as much a choice as is revolution against it.

Furthermore, in moral reasoning the concrete is always more important than the abstract, or, as Blake writes, “Moral clarity arises from the realization that this is the right thing to do, here and now, in this particular circumstance.”

In the end, Blake finds MacIntyre’s viewpoint more comprehensive than Gadamer’s, in that the latter is dismissive of natural law theories of morality, while the former finds a place for them as the ground rules for any engagement in moral reasoning with others.

Gene Callahan’s central thesis is that, while Oakeshott’s and Hayek’s understanding of rationalism bear similarities, there are also important differences, differences that are, in the end, even more important than the similiarities. Furthermore, the differences are comprehensible when understood as arising from the two thinkers different philosophical outlooks: Hayek’s emergent materialism and Oakeshott’s idealism. Given his outlook, Hayek must understand rationalism as the attempt to handle, with reason, areas of human life that are inherently “nonrational.” Oakeshott, on the other hand, conceives as rationalism as the attempt to apply *abstract* reason, and in particular scientific abstractions, to problems that can only be handled through practical reasoning.

Colin Cordner’s essay analyzes the differences between Voegelin’s and Polanyi’s views on “scientism,” which should be understood as a major species of rationalism: the abstractions of science, so this view goes, are the only valid way to understand the human experience, and all of its rivals must either “become scientific” or fade away. He contrasts scientism to true science, writing that the “comparison shall be of an ideal of a closed, fully objective and self-contained system of explicit rules and propositions, to the open, striving to understand the real by a responsible and embodied person. It is the latter, living and incarnate... which both thinkers uphold as the paradigm of both science and of spiritual health.”

In fact, per Cordner, scientism is part of the modern “revolt against reality,” in that it denies the “luminosity of consciousness,” the reality that the person attempting to adopt the scientistic view ignores the fact that he is himself a crucial aspect of reality: reality coming into self-awareness. The “dogmatic construction of reality as merely thing-reality... [is a] derailment, [within which] all experience of transcendence may come to be seen as instances of... insanity.” As Polanyi pointed out, the scientistic stance attempts to subject everything to doubt, a stance which, if actually adopted, would make science impossible: science proceeds first by “commitment... and personal knowledge,” with doubt being simply an auxiliiary tool to the scientist’s “commitment to truth.” Cordner concludes that Polanyi and Voegelin are “fully in agreement” on the nature of scientism, with their apparent differences coming down to a matter of terminological choices.

David Corey’s essay, “Voegelin on Ideology,” asks what the nature of Voegelin’s “spiritual critique of ideology” was, given it was “not exactly” Christian? Corey notes that, despite the fact that Voegelin relied on the classical, Jewish, and Christian traditions to “establish a standard of ‘healthy’ (non-ideological) consciousness, Voegelin came to see that Christianity itself was implicated in ideology’s rise... Without the rise and fall of Christian hegemony in the West, there would be no ideological mass movements.”

Corey goes on to explain that for Voegelin, “ideology” does not mean simply any ideas any person might hold, but “a system of ideas that purports to explain reality and man’s place in it, a system with political activsm as its goal, but which, in fact, badly misrepresents the human condition...” Most modern political movements share the characteristic of “forcing upon human nature an ill-fitting framework and then prescribing... violent action...” to make human beings fit the “Procrustean Bed” they have created. But why has this happened?

The answer comes from a consideration of “the open soul,” and the difficulty of living in the state of tension keeping one’s soul open produces. Such a soul recognizes that human existence involves a craving for answers to questions that cannot be answered. To the contrary, ideology succeeds by pretending to provide easy answers to these hard questions. To dodge the tension that is part of openness, the ideologue attempts to *force* closure, by embracing a phony answer and then re-interpreting reality in order to make it comport with that answer.

At the end of his essay, Corey examines some common criticisms of Voegelin’s body of work. He notes that, while questioning whether “Gnosticism” is the historically correct term for the phenomenon Voegelin wishes to examine, and whether he has really established genealogical links between various forms of spiritual revolt, are valid scholarly pursuits, “they should not distract us from the relevance of Voegelin’s work to our present political situation.”

Timothy Fuller’s contribution compares how Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott, and Eric Voegelin differed in their understanding of English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, but, more importantly, shows how those different understandings help us to comprehend the different viewpoints of Strauss, Oakeshott, and Voegelin.

Strauss saw a fundamental continuity between Hobbes and the classical tradition of political philosophy in the following regard: “He pursued a philosophic understanding of politics which cannot be reduced merely to debate over policy preferences.”

Voegelin appreciated Hobbes’s effort to dampen the fanaticism that the religious schisms of his time had produced. But he argued that Hobbes’s attempt ultimately came up short, as questions of “ultimate meaning” cannot, in fact, be continually banished from politics, but will repeatedly arise in new political movements resisting the banishment of the sacred from political life.

Oakeshott, meanwhile, understood Hobbes as the first great thinker to seriously grapple with the modern condition of a polity composed of individuals with fundamentally divergent worldviews.

Whatever their differences regarding Hobbes, Fuller concludes that, “Oakeshott, Strauss and Voegelin, in setting out to do this each in his own way, attest to Hobbes’s significance by engaging him at the level of philosophic dialogue he invites.”

Grant Havers’s paper, “Wittgenstein and the Athens-Jerusalem Conflict” addresses the problem of the “two Wittgensteins”: the young positivist who wrote the *Tractatus*, and the latter thinker who was skeptical about the power of abstract thought, and at times even seemed skeptical of the whole philosophical venture. Havers sets his examination of Wittgenstein in the context of the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem highlighted by Leo Strauss.

In particular, Havers asked whether, by his later-life embrace of the “Jerusalem” side of the conflict with “Athens,” Wittgenstein had not, in fact, abandoned philosophy completely in favor of faith. Havers seeks his answer chiefly in Wittgenstein’s work *Culture and Value*, believing it “represents Wittgenstein’s deepest reflections on the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem.” In particular, Havers sees that work as containing Wittgenstein’s “subtle defense of the ontological argument” for the existence of God. Havers believes that this argument, as understood by Wittgenstein, “helps us truly understand what is at stake in the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem.”

Havers provocatively suggests that Wittgenstein, in the end, finds the ontological argument to be one that shortcuts the dualism of religion *versus* philosophy, as it employs philosophical reasoning to demonstrate that God is not an empirical object that science could discover “out there” in the world, and that faith in God, once properly understood as an *attitude towards life*, is at least as “rational” as scientific materialism. And he goes on to suggest that true philosophy and genuine religious faith are actually allies, both opposed to “the idols of God and Man.”

Ferenc Hörcher seeks to compare the Oakeshott’s understanding of practical knowledge with that of Alasdair MacIntyre. Both of them adopted a more-or-less Aristotelian approach, one which sees *phronesis* (Aristotle’s term for practical understanding) as a valid and distinct form of understanding from theory. (And this is precisely what the rationalist denies, instead taking theoretical understanding as the only species of true knowledge.) Hörcher suggests that both Oakeshott and MacIntyre are important in offering distinct alternatives to the “apolitical” political philosophy of John Rawls, who took “both the external security and the internal governability of the US or Europe as virtually unproblematic,” thus in essence simply assuming that the most central political questions were all settled in favor of liberalism, and the only problem that remained was just how much wealth redistribution should take place in a liberal regime.

Hörcher examines Oakeshott’s understanding of practical knowledge primarily by looking at his the essays of his “middle period,” which were collected in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. He cites Oakeshott’s important definition of rationalism: “Rationalism is the assertion that what I have called practical knowledge is not knowledge at all.” Following from that assertion, the rationalist replaces the idea in “a beneficent and infallible God” with belief in beneficent and infallible *techniques* for obtaining true understanding.

Quite similarly, MacIntyre contrasts a pre-Enlightenment moral culture based upon “practical beliefs and supporting habits of thought, feeling, and action” with one in which “external standards” are supposed to guide our moral judgments, but repeatedly fail to resolve actual moral conflicts. Hörcher points out that MacIntyre’s communitarian approach to politics differs in many respects from Oakeshott’s more individualistic one; nevertheless, their Aristotelian understandings of the distinction between theory and practice have many similarities.

Kenneth McIntyre’s paper examines the similar critiques of rationalism offered by Oakeshott and his English contemporary, Gilbert Ryle. Ryle’s masterwork, *The Concept of Mind*, received a favorable review from Oakeshott, although he did criticize it for offering a somewhat shallow characterization of idealism. Neverthless, the reviewer clearly felt that Ryle’s critique of contemporary doctrines of mind as a “ghost in the machine” were largely in agreement with his own work on rational conduct. Neither thinker thought that action could possibly come about as it should per the rationalist account: no one could “rationally,” with an empty slate mind, simply think about some activity, prior to having engaged in it, and then go about it with mastery. Oakeshott’s summary of Ryle (from his review) shows how close their ideas were:

“In general [Ryle’s] doctrine is that ‘when we describe people is exercising qualities of mind, we are not referring to occult episodes of which their overt acts and utterances are effects: we are referring to those overt acts and utterances themselves.’ Mental activity is not the activity of a ‘mind,’ or activity which takes place in the hidden recesses of a mind, in distinction from the activity of a body: it is doing and saying things in a particular manner.”

Neverthless, the two thinkers differed in some important ways. As McIntyre notes, Oakeshott had a much more robust conception of the “modes” in which thought might appear than did Ryle, who simply noted that we quite properly think about different areas of life employing different ways of proceeding. And the philosophical basis for Oakeshott’s critique of rationalism is more explicit: it stems from his British Idealist roots. Ryle, a serious student of phenomenological philosophy, mentioned that his attack on the ghost in the machine might be understood as a work of phenomenology, but did not stress this connection, something that might be viewed as either a weakness or a strength in his approach, depending on one’s view of the importance of philosophical grounding for an epistemology.

Despite these differences, Oakeshott and Ryle can be seen as twin sons of different mothers, both working to undermine the same, prevalent misconception of the nature of the mental. As McIntyre sums it up:

The philosophical significance of Ryle’s and Oakeshott’s conclusions is quite far-reaching. The acceptance of the priority of tacit knowledge involves the rejection of philosophical accounts of morality, politics, and the law which reduce them to a set of rule-like statements and a similar rejection of the reductionist accounts of epistemology.

Mark Mitchell compares the attitude of Eric Voegelin and Michael Polanyi to the problem of faith. The notion of faith relates to rationalism as follows: the rationalist typically contends that we must never, on pain of being condemned as “irrational,” rely on any notions that cannot be demonstrated, empirically or logically, as being true, or at least probable. But, as Mitchell shows, both Polanyi and Voegelin demonstrate that this idea is incoherent: “all we know and *cannot* prove... underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we *can* prove.”

Mitchell argues that Polanyi’s and Voegelin’s critiques of rationalism dovetail nicely; as he puts it: “the epistemological solution encompassed in Polanyi’s personal knowledge fits well with Voegelin’s insistence that we must recover an awareness of human participation in transcendent reality... the solutions offered by both provide useful supports for the other: Polanyi’s theory of knowledge adds an important dimension to Voegelin, while Voegelin’s insistence on openness to the transcendent makes explicit what Polanyi only occasionally intimates.”

Furthermore, both thinkers offer similar critiques of the societal effects of the current dominance of rationalism. The link between rationalism and totalitarianism arises from the fact that “scientistic men are at liberty to attempt to re-create human nature in a more suitable fashion than that which had been previously tolerated.” And since scientism, or objectivism, rejects all traditional moral restraints as atavisms to be overcome, there were no limits on the tactics these men could employ to create this “new man”: the Gulag, the killing fields, and concentration camps were all just ways to rid humanity of the “reactionary” elements who resisted the various rationalist visions. Importantly, as Mitchell notes, this movement in truth had nothing “scientific” about it: “Scientism became the new religion, and its priests, the scientists and modern philosophers, employed epistemological objectivism as their instrument of worship.”

Daniel Sportiello’s essay, “Rationalism in Voegelin,” examines what, exactly, “rationalism” meant to Voegelin. He invokes the idea of an “Axial Age,” first formulated by Karl Jaspers, as a way of differentiating what, for Voegelin, was truly reasonable, as opposed to what modern rationalists consider to be reasonable. As Sportiello describes the situation, prior to the Axial Age (roughly to be placed between 800 and 500 BCE), the human good “was a matter of attaining the material: at the risk of caricature, happiness meant more food, drink, wives, sons, and daughters -- and, once they became relevant, more money and possessions.” To the contrary, the great figures of the Axial Age, such as Buddha, Lao-Tse, Plato, Confucius, Zoroaster, and Isaiah, held that human flourishing depended upon adherence to a transcendental order that might entail sacrificing material well-being to conform to that order. Rather than treating all other humans as competitors, whose achievement of the good would tend to block one’s own such achievement, to truly achieve happiness required respecting the “golden rule” of treating others as one would oneself wish to be treated. In that for Voegelin, as for Jaspers, the Axial Age was an advance in human consciousness, “what is authentically rational is what is axial.”

Thus, for Voegelin, “‘rationalism,’ as the word is usually used today, indicates what is, according to Voegelin, irrational.” (And in this respect, Voegelin is completely aligned with Oakeshott, who, in a letter to Karl Popper, noted that “rationalism in my sense is... thoroughly unreasonable.” https://www.scribd.com/document/78647839/Letter-to-Popper)

Quite to the contrary, for rationalist theorists, “rooting society in the axial conception of happiness was a sort of madness.” And the 17th and 18th century rationalists would cite the English Civil War and the Thirty Years’ War as evidence for that contention. But, as Sportiello notes, Voegelin offers an alternative explanation for these conflicts:

“Tired of waiting for heaven -- that is, for a condition where the transcendent would no more have to compromise with the immanent -- these men and women [of the European wars of religion] tried to render it here on earth. Because this cannot be done, they could not agree on how to do it; because they could not agree on how to do it -- and yet agreed that it needed to be done -- they tore one another to shreds.”

John von Heyking asks the question, “Was Hayek a Rationalist?” He sees rationalism as “the effort to replace practical reason guided by experience with abstract rules generated by theoretical reason.” When the rationalist turns to politics, he seeks to order political society like a geometry exercise, and ignores the “messiness, tensions, and ambiguities of political life.”

Von Heyking turns to Hayek fan and critic Tom Flanagan to help answer his titular question. While Flanagan appreciates Hayek’s “immanent” inquiry into the roots of social order, he cannot reach as deep into those roots as can Voegelin’s “transcendent” approach. While Hayek’s appreciation for the spontaneous order of the “Great Society” (of a globe-spanning market order) is a genuine insight, his work still comes up short in two respects:   
1) His vision of the Great Society relies on the Kantian principle that we must treat other humans as ends in themselves, and not mere means to our own ends. However, in reality, given how thin is our knowledge of other individuals in the Great Society, all we can realistically do is treat them as means.   
2) Hayek is also unsatisfactory in that he provides no explanation of how individuals, embedded in a vast social order they can only partially comprehend, can nevertheless deliberately set about improving that order by, as Hayek put it, “constantly holding up the guiding conception of an internally consistent model which could be realized by the consistent application of the same principles...”   
But, von Heyking concludes, this sort of “system-building is the rationalist dream.” While a perceptive critic of the worst aspects of rationalism, Hayek himself could not fully escape its siren call.

\* Zoltán Balázs, Nathanael Blake, and Kenneth McIntyre all assisted in the writing of this introduction.