# Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited

## Introduction

As one might surmise from the title, *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited* is a companion volume to *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*, the latter having been published in 2020. In the earlier work,we were not attempting to offer a comprehensive collection of thinkers critical of Enlightenment rationalism. Instead, we were engaged in a preliminary examination of a loosely connected group of writers who formed a not particularly self-conscious alternative tradition in the field of modern epistemology, broadly conceived. Indeed, we did not initially plan to produce more than one volume, but, in the process of producing the first one, we were forced to leave out many thinkers whose contributions to the critique of Enlightenment rationalism were genuinely original and of central importance. Some were omitted because of page restrictions, and others were omitted because the author who volunteered to write on the thinker dropped out of the project. While we were engaged in culling the herd (so to speak), it was suggested to us by the editor of the series that we could always publish a second volume, if the first one went smoothly and if we wanted to continue the project. The value of this second volume lies consists in its capacity to increase the scope and breadth of the first volume, offering a more comprehensive account of this alternative tradition. The authors examined in the second volume include novelists, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, literary critics, historians, and public intellectuals.

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,” a term we use in an historically loose sense, to cover not just leaders of the Enlightenment itself, but also latter figures whose model of what is rational closely resembles that espoused during the Enlightenment.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The essays on each thinker are intended not merely to offer a commentary on that thinker, but also to place him in the context of this larger stream of anti-rationalist thought. Thus, 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, political theorists, and more. But there is unity in this diversity. Although these authors worked in a variety of forms, they all sought to demonstrate the narrowness of 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.[[2]](#endnote-2) Since one of the claims that we are making is that the tradition which we are examining is strikingly polyphonous, we suggest that the most appropriate way of examining and elaborating the tradition is through the multiple voices of authors and academics from a variety of backgrounds.

As suggested, 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 gives uniform and predictable answers as to what is moral in any particular situation.

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 often contradict one another. There are epistemological pluralists like Vico, Weber, Löwith, and Hampshire who draw sharp distinctions between scientific, aesthetic, historical, and practical modes of discourse, and, thus, reject the Enlightenment rationalists’ claims concerning the superiority of scientific explanation. There are religious believers like Pascal and Tolkien who criticize the ‘faith’ in human reason exhibited by Enlightenment rationalists. There are aesthetes like Eliot, Babbitt, and Bulgakov who decry the insipid and desiccated conception of humanity put forward by the Enlightenment rationalists. There are critics of modernity itself like Schmitt, Nisbet, and Scruton 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 Shackle and Bateson.

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 (e.g., 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.

*Blaise Pascal* (1623-1662) was a French mathematician, physicist, philosopher, and theologian. Tyler Chamberlain argues that it is important to understand Pascal as recognizing a basis for both the extreme skepticism of Montaigne and the rationalism of Descartes. Both of their positions forward a half-truth: in man’s fallen state, his reason is indeed limited, as Montaigne notes… but not obliterated, which means Descartes is not wrong to defend its use. But each position fails to acknowledge the truth of the other one. Chamberlain argues that, to arrive at a true picture of the human condition, we must assert both truths simultaneously. While doing so, he debunks efforts to portray Pascal as adopting these positions as successive moments in a dialectical movement: no, Chamberlain argues, we don’t really understand Pascal unless we reject that view.

*Giambattista Vico* (1668-1744) was a Neopolitan philosopher of history. Vico was somewhat obscure during his lifetime, but gained renown as his most important work, *Scienza Nuova* (*The New Science*), came to be admired by a diverse group of thinkers including Karl Marx, R.G. Collingwood, Benedetto Croce, James Joyce, Eric Voegelin, and Marshall McLuhan. Emily Finley argues that Vico provided one of the earliest critiques of the Enlightenment elevation of abstract reason at the expense of historical and imaginative understanding. Finley sees Vico as using Cartesian skepticism against Cartesian conclusions, so that, for him, our only certain knowledge is of the human institutions we ourselves have created, and not of the abstractions towards which Descartes gravitated.

*George Eliot* (1819-1880) was the fiction-writing pen name of Mary Ann Evans. Under her birth name, she established herself as an important translator, editor, and critic. As George Eliot, she wrote some of the most important novels in English literature, including *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*. She was a careful student of the work of Spinoza, and embraced many rationalist ideas. But, as Rob Wyllie shows in his contribution, she was a cautious rationalist, who rejected many of the most radical rationalist propositions. In particular, she was skeptical of rationalist schemes for rebuilding human social life from the ground up, as she understood them to ignore the ineradicable influence of traditions and customs on human social behavior.

*Max Weber* (1864-1920) is often considered the founder of modern sociology. His work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is one of the great works of social science. In her essay on Weber, Lucie Miryekta argues that, contra the common view, Weber was not a rationalist, but, rather, was setting out the limits of instrumental reason in order to demonstrate that human life demands more: in particular, the social agent is responsible for deciding, without guidance by instrumental rationality, just what values he or she chooses to promote.

*Irving Babbitt* (1865-1933) was an American literary critic and professor of literature at Harvard. Among his students was T.S. Eliot. He was a leader of the “New Humanism” movement in the United States, and he drew upon the ancient Greeks and Romans, early Christianity, Confucianism, and Buddhism to create his distinct type of humanism. Justin Garrison describes how, contrary to Enlightenment rationalists’ emphasis on abstract reason as the proper guide to human conduct and social organization, Babbitt emphasized the roles of imagination and will: imagination enabled human beings to form a pre-conceptual vision of what human life ought to be like, and the will enabled them to pursue that vision. (In his emphasis on the role imagination, he is similar to Vico, Shackle and Hampshire.) For Babbitt, reason could conceptualize and analyze facets of a broader intuitive vision, but it had limited ability independently to break through dubious forms of imagination to establish contact with reality. Thus, while not a strict adherent of any tradition, he saw traditional cultural practices as highly valuable in directing the imagination and will towards harmonious visions of human life.

*Carl Schmitt* (1888-1985) is one of the most controversial figures in the history of political thought. It has been difficult for his commentators to separate his insights about the political condition from his support of Nazism in the 1930s. Gulsen Seven and Aylin Özman do an exemplary job pulling apart these two facets of Schmitt, so that we can appreciate his critique of political rationalism on its own merits.

*Mikhail Bulgakov* (1891-1940) was a Russian novelist, writing during Stalin’s reign in the USSR, exhibiting extraordinary courage in continuing to write works that often would be banned or censured by the Communist regime. Jason Ferrell sees Bulgakov as an important dissident challenging the claim of the Marxist rulers of the USSR to “scientific rationality.” In particular, by emphasizing nature, chance, and conscience, and true human choice in light of these realities, Bulgakov, at great cost to himself, defends human freedom against the terrible power of a society in the grip of a rationalist delusion.

*J.R.R. Tolkien* (1892-1973) wrote some of the best-selling novels of the last century, as well as being a professor of English language and literature at Oxford. In his chapter on Tolkien, Nathanael Blake shows how a current of anti-rationalism, informed by Tolkien’s Catholic understanding of humans as finite creatures with limited understanding, ran throughout the author’s work.

*Karl Löwith* (1897-1973) was a German historian and philosopher who understood the Enlightenment as an attempt to secularize Christianity. Ryan Alexander McKinnell says that Löwith argued that thinkers such as Marx had no rational case for holding that history has a plan. Furthermore, as McKinnell observes, Löwith noted that, by secularizing the theological conception of history and seeking to realize the Kingdom of God on earth, the speculative philosophy of history promoted by thinkers like Marx proves to have perverse political consequences.

*Owen Barfield* (1898-1997) was a philosopher and poet. As a member of the Inklings, he was a friend of both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. In her essay on Barfield, Sarah Wilford offers a three-part exploration of his thought which categorizes his central contributions as concerning the importance of metaphor, meaning, and mind. Her essay organizes a sprawling body of thought, and provides a structured narrative path that ultimately leads readers to Barfield’s critique of rationalism and his advocacy for imagination. After introducing his work on language in the section on metaphor, this chapter addresses the problem of meaning prompted by these linguistic investigations. The section on mind then turns to human cognition. Finally, building on metaphor, meaning, and mind, the chapter concludes by examining Barfield’s critique of rationalism.

*G.L.S. Shackle* (1903-1992) was an English economist. A student of both the Austrian and Keynesian schools, he critiqued contemporary mathematical economics for its pretense of determinism. Instead, his work stressed the true creative power of human choice, and the importance of imagination in envisioning what choices are possible. Gene Callahan argues that, given the importance of “economic rationality” to modern rationalism as a whole, Shackle is an underappreciated figure among anti-rationalist thinkers.

*Gregory Bateson* (1904-1980) was an English anthropologist, linguist, semiotician, and cyberneticist. Charles Lowney contends that Bateson saw a dangerous insanity in how we use critical reason to advance human purposes. This insanity is responsible for the destruction of both human communities and ecological systems. He rejected the idea that “mind” should be applied to only conscious rationality, instead arguing that it should be applied to self-sustaining systems that receive, transform, and exchange information. Our conscious mind deals with a narrow window of partial information and can lead us into “double-binds.” Our non-rational responses to things such as beauty can actually convey important information that promotes healing. What’s more, the concept of “mind” should be expanded to include the Earth’s ecosystem as a whole, an entity Bateson called “Eco.”

*Robert Nisbet* (1913-1996) was an American sociologist most renowned for his critique of the devastating effect of the modern state on the “little battalions” of family and local communities. Luke Sheahan highlights Nisbet’s approach to social science, which, while not dismissing quantitative research, contends that the work of the great sociologists, such as Tocqueville, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, would not have gained prominence if the modern emphasis and quantitative methods had ruled in their time. Deep insight and intuition are much more important than formal techniques in producing true breakthroughs in social thought.

*A.C. Graham* (1919-1991) was a Welsh sinologist and philosopher. W.J. Coats contends that Graham made an important distinction between “anti-rationalism” and “irrationalism,” showing that the former does not imply the latter. Following the lead of the classical Daoist thinker Zhuangzi, Graham made the case for “aware spontaneity” as capturing the proper balance between being ruled by abstract thought and being ruled by mere instinct and impulse. Coats also notes some important parallels between Graham’s thought and that of Michael Oakeshott, one of the most prominent critics of rationalism.

*Elizabeth Anscombe* (1919-2001) was an English philosopher and protégé of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his essay, Daniel Sportiello argues that Anscombe’s critique of modern moral philosophy also involves a critique of modern rationalism. He suggests that Anscombe articulates a tension within the moral consequentialism which exemplifies modern moral theories. According to Sportiello, Anscombe observes that the *form* of consequentialism presupposes the existence of a divine legislator, while the *content* of consequentialism presupposes the nonexistence of a divine legislator. One important conclusion that Anscombe draws from this tension within consequentialism is that, once one convinces oneself that it’s rational to do much evil if *more* good may come of it, it becomes easier for one to convince oneself that it’s rational to do much evil if *some* good may come of it.

*Stuart Hampshire* (1914-2004) was an English philosopher, and a member of the circle of Oxford philosophers who promoted ordinary language philosophy. Kenneth B. McIntyre argues that he later distanced himself from that movement, and offered an important critique of scientism, one of the main currents of rationalist thought. As McIntyre notes, Hampshire argued that thought cannot be reduced to mathematical calculation nor to empirical description, but instead is necessarily tied to an individual agent’s particular perception, intellect, and imagination.

*Roger Scruton* (1944-2020) was an English philosopher. He was educated as an analytic philosopher, but, Ferenc Horcher writes, his presence in Paris during the violent uprising of May 1968 convinced him that something was foul in the state of Enlightenment rationalism. As Horcher describes the later Scruton, he came to believe that, in the socio-political realm, individual rationality should often yield to manners, customs, and traditional institutions. Abstract reason needs to be balanced by both practical wisdom and love of one’s own place in the world. Scruton also defended the value of artistic traditions, especially traditional architecture, against modernists.

*John Gray* (1948-) is an English political philosopher. His career is notable for his continually evolving position. Gray started out on the left, and supported Labour until his move to the right in the mid-1970s. He became somewhat of a Hayekian libertarian, until migrating leftward again in the 1990s, when he became a trenchant critic of the claims of philosophical liberalism. As Nathan Cockram has it, he focused much of his attack on the liberal vision of John Rawls, which held that citizens, while holding a wide variety of views on fundamental values, could nevertheless rationally arrive at an “overlapping consensus” of principles that all could agree upon, and that that consensus would be liberalism. Gray contends that Rawls only dealt with a “superficial pluralism,” and that liberalism can only be saved by regarding it as a “modus vivendi,” a compromise that allows people with fundamentally irreconcilable value systems to live together in peace, rather than as the only rationally defensible political regime.

1. We are not concerned with delineating a specific historical event or series of events in the manner of an intellectual historian, nor are we interested in offering a rationalized version of the ‘philosophy’ of the Enlightenment or a cultural history of the Enlightenment. For academically significant examples of each, see respectively J.G.A. Pocock’s magisterial history of Enlightenment historiography *Barbarism and Religion, Volumes One, Two, and Three* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 1999, 2003); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); and Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, Volumes One and Two* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966, 1969). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We are also not involving ourselves in the ongoing historical debate about the Counter-Enlightenment. Whether the Counter-Enlightenment is best understood as a discrete and internally coherent tradition of criticism of Enlightenment thinkers and their ideas or whether it is best understood in a pluralistic way as composed of a group of thinkers without a single target or a unified argument is beyond our remit in this volume. The thinker most often associated with the notion that the Counter-Enlightenment constituted a coherent and directed attack against the Enlightenment is Isaiah Berlin, though this line of argument has been supported in recent years by thinkers like Zeev Sternhell. See Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder, Second Edition*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, David Maisel, trans. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)