# Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited

## Introduction

*Blaise Pascal* (1623-1662) was a French mathematician, physicists, philosopher, and theologian. Tyler Chamberlain argues that it is important to understand Pascal as recognizing a basis for both the extreme scepticism 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 dialectial 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 scepticism 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 graviated.

*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 sceptical 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.

*Fyodor Dostoevsky* (1821-1881) was a Russian novelist and essayist, and is often regarded as one of the most significant writers in world literature.

*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 they choose 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 humans to form a pre-conceptual vision of what human life ought to be like, and the will enabled them to pursue that vision. 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. Tolkein* (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 Tolkein, Nathanael Blake shows how a current of anti-rationalism, informed by Tolkein’s Catholic understanding of humans as finite creatures with limited understanding, ran throughout the author’s work.

*Karl Lowith* (1897-1973) was a German Jew Who understood the Enlightenment as an attempt to secularize Chritianity. Ryan Alexander McKinnell says that Lowith argued that thinkers such as Marx had no rational case for holding that history has a plan. Furthermore, as McKinnell puts it, “by secularizing the theological conception of history and seeking to realize the Kingdom of God on earth the philosophy of history 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. Tolkein and C.S. Lewis.

*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. 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 de 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.

*Elizabeth Anscombe* (1919-2001) was an English philosopher and protege of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

*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.

*Stuart Hampshire* (1914-2004) was an English philospher, 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 puts it, “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 analytical 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, custom, 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 somewhat 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 togegther in peace, rather than as the only rationally defensible politcal regime.