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# Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism

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*Edited by*  
Gene Callahan · Kenneth B. McIntyre

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# Palgrave Studies in Classical Liberalism

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Gene Callahan • Kenneth B. McIntyre  
Editors

# Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism

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Kenneth B. McIntyre

4 September 2019

Madison, WI

Many thanks to the patience of my wife, Elen, to the support of my children, Eamon, Emma, and Adam, to Leslie Marsh for encouraging us in this project, and to David Boucher for his mentorship. Selah.

Eugene Callahan

5 September 2019

Brooklyn, NY

## Praise for *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*

“Callahan and McIntyre have brought together a distinguished and cosmopolitan array of contributors who have produced a lively and provocative collection of essays exploring and analyzing the modern phenomenon of Enlightenment rationalism, whose distinguished critics range from the historically important Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Friedrich Nietzsche, to our near contemporaries Hans-Georg Gadamer, Eric Voegelin and Michael Oakeshott. The connecting and fascinating thread that runs through the volume is a relentless critique of a style of thinking that prioritizes the pursuit of certainty, and a blind belief in the powers of instrumental reason to overcome all adversity.”

—David Boucher, *Professor of Political Philosophy and International Relations, Cardiff University, UK*

“This volume could not have arrived at a better time. McIntyre and Callahan have given us an excellent set of essays that speaks directly to the fetishization of human reason. Each of the thinkers examined reminds us of the fallibility of human beings—a lesson we sorely need to revisit every generation or so.”

—Richard Avramenko, *Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA*

“This is a remarkable and remarkably comprehensive collection on thinkers who questioned enlightenment rationalism, both in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The list is impressive: Tocqueville, Kierkegaard, Burke, Nietzsche, Eliot, as well as Oakeshott, Hayek, Alasdair MacIntyre, and a number of others equally stellar, and equally deep and complex. The essays are by accomplished scholars, and show that the opposition to enlightenment rationalism was both diverse and strikingly coherent, and a treasure trove for thinking beyond the enlightenment. It will be especially valuable for those with interests in one of these thinkers to see them in the context of the larger fraternity to which they belong.”

—Stephen Turner, *Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy, University of South Florida, USA*

“The variety of topics considered, the range of thinkers included, the striking and ultimately illuminating juxtaposition of approaches combine to cast, not a spotlight, but indeed multiple of points of light on a rich selection of important thinkers from the later-modern period. Scholars and students interested in modern critics of modernity will benefit from the range of figures treated here and the depth of the commentaries on them.”

—Alexander S. Duff, *Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of North Texas, USA*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

*Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre*

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 resembled that espoused during the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

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,

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philosophers, economists, political theorists, and urbanists. 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Gadamer, Oakeshott, and Berlin 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 Kierkegaard who criticize the "faith" in human reason exhibited by Enlightenment rationalists (this group of critics tends to be Augustinian Christians). There are aesthetes like Eliot, Lewis, and Kirk who decry the insipid and desiccated conception of humanity put forward by the Enlightenment rationalists. There are critics of modernity itself like Heidegger and MacIntyre 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 Polanyi and Hayek.

Other than Nietzsche, 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 (Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, et al.), though all are highly critical of Enlightenment rationalism. Additionally, due to limitations on space and time, we were not able to include a number of other figures within our bailiwick, such as Herder, De Maistre, Carlyle, Coleridge, Spengler, Arendt, Gray, and Scott. We hope to produce a second volume that can remedy these omissions.

Having looked at our criteria for selecting what thinkers to include, let us now turn to the thinkers themselves. In his chapter on **Edmund Burke** (1729–1797), Ferenc Horcher argues that Burke’s critique of the French Revolution focuses specifically on the inappropriateness of the philosophes’ and revolutionaries’ attempt to apply an abstract and rationalistic blueprint to the messy complexities of French political life. According to Horcher, Burke is justly understood as the founder of a political tradition which might with good reason be labelled as British conservatism. One of the central features of Burke’s position is his skepticism about the usefulness and applicability of theoretical abstractions in political affairs. Horcher notes that Burke’s criticism of the French philosophes centered on the practical destruction caused by their “social engineering,” and on the ever more radical (and more bloodthirsty) revolutionary regimes created by such “social engineering.”

Further, Burke argued that the nature of politics is exceedingly complex. (As Jane Jacobs, discussed later in this volume, would have put it, it is a matter of organized complexity, rather than simple order or pure randomness.) Thus, the optimism characteristic of enlightened intellectuals when they enter the political arena is not only logically unfounded, but also politically counterproductive and often pernicious. Horcher focuses his attention on those parts of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which helped to identify a less optimistic, but more realistic view of politics which has characteristic British traits, the most significant of which is a belief in the value of such non-instrumentally rational political institutions as precedents, custom, and political experience.

Travis Smith and Jin Jin discuss **Alexis de Tocqueville’s** (1805–1859) nuanced criticism of rationalism by examining his views on the relationship between philosophy and politics in *Democracy in America* and *Recollections*. According to Smith and Jin, Tocqueville claims that the preservation of liberty requires a new political science to educate the

ineluctably emerging democratic social state. Tocqueville argues that the ascendant political science of the Enlightenment, which aimed at whole-sale social engineering, is actually an unscientific and partial ideology that is oblivious to certain aspects of the human condition, and obliterates other parts.

For Smith and Jin, Tocqueville's recognition that both ethics and politics require educated virtue means that reason and political liberty are inherently complementary. However, Tocqueville notes that the kind of rationalism espoused by the French philosophes depends on assuming ever more control over people's lives. Smith and Jin observe that Tocqueville witnessed at firsthand multiple attempts to implement rationalistic systems following the end of the Old Regime, and his more realistic science of politics explains why they necessarily failed to produce the supposedly just society or free people they were purportedly designed to construct while succeeding instead at fostering ever more dehumanizing injustices.

According to Smith and Jin, Tocqueville insists that political freedom requires virtue, and virtue requires reason, but reason is best developed when human beings are given the freedom to meet their greatest potential. Politics dominated by uncritical veneration of reason, especially an Enlightenment conception of reason that is simultaneously excessive and deficient, undermines virtue and freedom alike.

While 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 Robert Wyllie in his essay on the Dane: “Kierkegaard is a famous critic of rationalism, though less well known as a critic of *political* rationalism”. Kierkegaard condemned what he saw as his era's tendency to replace decisive action with political “talkativeness, chatter, or chit-chat”: 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”. Wyllie 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 Wyllie 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.

Justin Garrison offers an account of **Friedrich Nietzsche’s** (1844–1900) critique of Enlightenment rationalism which is unique in this volume in that, according to Garrison, Nietzsche rejects not only Enlightenment rationalism, but even the idea of rational discourse itself. Garrison offers us Thomas Jefferson, rather than the French philosophes, as his primary foil. Of course, Jefferson was a great admirer of the philosophes specifically and the Enlightenment generally. As Garrison notes, Jefferson consistently proclaimed the innate goodness and rationality of human beings, and believed that governments propped up by irrational claims of authority, particularly the “monkish ignorance” of religious authority, had subverted these qualities too often. For Jefferson, a new science of politics, one grounded in reason rather than superstition, offered hope because it allowed for the discovery of a rational foundation for government worthy of the people it would serve.

Per Garrison, Nietzsche would find Jefferson’s political thought naïve and unphilosophical. Nietzsche argued instead that Enlightenment rationalism did not inaugurate a break from the religious past so much as it re-packaged pre-existing ethical and political beliefs in verbiage stripped of many pre-existing theological and metaphysical associations. Thus, modern rationalism was not a new thing under the sun, but was instead an example of a serious problem Nietzsche believed he had already identified in Christianity: nihilism. Garrison explores Nietzsche’s understanding of reason, morality, equality, Christianity, and democracy, and applies Nietzsche’s analysis to those elements in Jefferson’s political thought. By borrowing Nietzsche’s hammer to “sound out” Jefferson’s mind, Garrison suggests that Jefferson’s oft-celebrated democracy of reason is tinged with misanthropy and world hatred. In other words, such a vision is a manifestation of the ascetic ideal and thus is ultimately nihilistic. Because many see Jefferson as a paradigmatic figure in the American Founding, even as an incarnation of the American spirit, the chapter has broad implications for interpreting a fundamental dimension of the American political tradition.

Corey Abel grapples with the conundrum of how **T.S. Eliot** (1888–1965), one of the paradigmatic “modernist” writers, could also have been a staunch defender of tradition. Abel quotes Eliot arguing, “The sound tree will put forth new leaves, and the dry tree should be put to the axe,” and describes the quote as “a vivid image of Eliot’s modernism”.

So, for this paradigmatic modernist, what, exactly, is the value of tradition? Abel argues that Eliot actually had a nuanced view of culture and art grounded in a robust conception of tradition. He interprets Eliot as believing that, “from the poet’s standpoint, a tradition provides buoyancy... Tradition, for the artist, is the gift of form”. When poets are writing within a tradition, each poet has less work to do to express themselves than does any poet who attempts to abandon all traditions. (Of course, as Oakeshott demonstrated, such an abandonment is never really possible.) Abel suggests that Eliot’s sensibility provides a view of tradition that powerfully challenges modern ideological habits of thinking.

Daniel Sportiello, in his chapter on **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889–1951), examines how Wittgenstein’s later philosophy brings into question many of the assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism, especially its focus on quasi-mathematical reasoning. According to Sportiello, the focus of Wittgenstein’s critique of rationalism was his rejection of the thesis that there is a single right way to do whatever it is that we do, and that way can be discovered by the use of an abstract faculty called reason.

Sportiello observes that, for Wittgenstein, our words and deeds are justified only by the rules of particular language games, but these language games are themselves justified only insofar as they meet our needs; certainly none of them need be justified by reference to any of the others. In claiming this, Wittgenstein is something more than a pragmatist since he believes that the rectitude of all of our discourse is a matter of its use (for whatever ends we happen to have). Taken together, our language games constitute our form of life, though this form of life is not entirely arbitrary, as some of its features can be explained by reference to our nature. Nonetheless, per Sportiello, Wittgenstein claims that our form or forms of life could be different in many ways. Indeed, the forms of life that have characterized human communities have been and will continue to be marked by significant differences. Thus, for Wittgenstein, the failure of Enlightenment rationalism lies in its attempt to reduce the variety of language games and forms of life to a single, abstract, rational unity. Sportiello suggests that Wittgenstein reminds us that, on some level, we all know this. Philosophy at its worst is the attempt to forget it; philosophy at its best is, therefore, the attempt to remember it.

The work of **Martin Heidegger** (1889–1976), Jack Simmons says, can be understood largely as a critique of scientism. As he writes, “Science sees the world scientifically and Heidegger contends that this method of revealing the natural world conceals non-scientific ways in which the world

might appear to us, ways that might represent a more authentic encounter with the world". As Simmons notes, the supposedly timeless "natural scientific reasoning" is itself an historical phenomenon, and has no valid claim to resist being evaluated as such. And, in fact, "The reductionist approach of modern, scientific reasoning makes it well-suited to a utilitarian worldview Heidegger calls technological thinking". Here we might note the similarity to both Marcel's and Oakeshott's attacks on "the tyranny of technique."

According to Simmons, the relevance of Heidegger's critique of technological thinking is demonstrated by "Our current affinity for STEM education, wedding science to technology, engineering and mathematics, in order to satisfy the needs of the community as determined by a reductionist, economic theory, and reducing the student to an economic resource".

**Gabriel Marcel** (1889–1973), notes Steven Knepper, hosted one of the most important salons in Paris both before and after the Second World War, attended by Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Levinas, and others. As such, he influenced several major intellectual movements, such as Catholic personalism and existentialism. He would doubtlessly be better known today if he had chosen to align himself with some such movement, and adopt a "doctrine" which could have yielded him "followers."

However, Knepper argues, "Marcel worried that such labels distort or lead to assumptions". Philosophy should be an open inquiry that did not imprison him in a "sort of shell". Nevertheless, an attack on "technocratic rationalism" is a continuing theme in Marcel's work.

Marcel's concern with the "tyranny of technique," which "drowns the deeper human in a conspiracy of efficiency and a frenzy of industry" closely echo Oakeshott's criticism of the "sovereignty of technique," and Heidegger's attack on "technological thinking." The focus on technique tended to turn life into a technological problem to be solved, and other human beings into resources to be possessed for the assistance they might provide in solving life's problems. (As evidenced by the ubiquity of "human resource" departments.) Mystery is drained out of existence: death becomes a tricky biomedical challenge to be handled as discreetly as possible, and love is a matter of achieving as high a "relationship rating" as possible in some romance "app."

This solution to this problem, for Marcel, was not to abandon technique, or reject technological progress. Instead, he argued, "What I think

we need today is to react with our whole strength against that disassociation of life from spirit which a bloodless rationalism has brought about”.

Charles Lowney’s essay on **Michael Polanyi** (1891–1976) argues that Polanyi’s work demonstrates that the Enlightenment’s standards defining knowledge contain distortions that often have destructive effects, and in a variety of ways. According to Lowney, Polanyi was a sympathetic critic of the Enlightenment, which makes sense given Polanyi’s own success as a natural scientist. Polanyi admired the Enlightenment’s political ideals, but its rationalism led to a misunderstanding of the character of science, a misunderstanding that Polanyi called “scientism.” Lowney notes that, for Polanyi, this ideological “scientism” tended to reject the objectivity of anything not based on physics and chemistry, thus relegating human values to the realm of the purely subjective.

Lowney claims that Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy revises Enlightenment standards to more accurately reflect the limits of knowledge and how science actually proceeds. This involves critiquing (1) the viability of complete objectivity, (2) the adequacy of Cartesian explicit analysis to simple self-evident truths, (3) the concomitant reductive analysis of reality to smallest physical components, and (4) reductive dichotomies between mind and matter, and between fact and value. Polanyi accomplishes this with his conceptions of (1) personal knowledge, (2) tacit knowing, (3) emergent being, and (4) discovery and indwelling. For Lowney, Polanyi’s work undermines the traditional conception of scientific knowledge, and shows that, instead, science moves toward truth, and better contact with reality, by using the same tools of practical knowing that produce understanding in those cultural and religious traditions that are open to dialogue and discovery. Values, and not just physical facts, can be real discoveries about the world. Polanyi’s post-critical epistemology thus provides a non-skeptical fallibilism that goes beyond simple dualisms and reductionism, forestalls a regression into nihilism, and renews hope in human progress.

**C.S. Lewis** (1898–1963), notes Luke Sheahan, may seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion in a book on anti-rationalists. After all, in a series of books, he used reasoned arguments to defend the Christian faith. But he believed that the effectiveness of such arguments “depended upon a deeper mode of knowing”. Lewis is considered one of the most prominent Christian apologists of the twentieth century. But he held a deep distrust of the work of the rational faculty that was not properly oriented by the imagination, which explains in large part his turn to writing imaginative

fiction later in his life. Through his fiction Lewis was trying to demonstrate, rather than rationally explain, what the world would look like if Christianity and the broader moral worldview in which it exists were true. Lewis explains this understanding of the imagination and its importance for right thinking in a variety of essays and in his two most profound books, *The Abolition of Man* and *The Discarded Image*.

**F.A. Hayek's** (1899–1992) anti-rationalism, argues Nick Cowen, is founded upon a revival of Scottish Enlightenment scepticism combined with a psychology that rejects a correspondence between human orderings of experience and “reality.” Despite the epistemic restrictions this view apparently imposes, Hayek believes that humans can use their capacity for “pattern recognition” to generate and sustain cooperative social orders through a process of trial and error. Institutions that allow this cooperative order to emerge centrally include private property, voluntary contract, and the rule of law. Unlike many utopian theorists, Hayek does not rely upon fundamental normative claims for his political ideas. Thus, Cowen argues, his ideas are compatible with a cosmopolitan order made up of people with varied conceptions of morality. He connects Hayek’s argument against rationalism to other such critiques, which often rely on a distinction between the concrete and the abstract, when he notes that: “A necessary feature of concrete orders is that they always have more dimensions and features to them than we have apprehend. They are irreducibly complex. Abstract orders, by contrast, are the simplified models and categories that we use to make sense of our experience and communications with others”.

In his chapter on **Hans-Georg Gadamer** (1900–2002), Ryan Holston explores Gadamer’s ambivalent relationship to Martin Heidegger (the subject of his own chapter in the current volume) and the unusual way in which Gadamer combined Heidegger’s historicism with the tradition of Western metaphysics that was the very target of Heidegger’s own critique of Enlightenment rationalism. According to Holston, Gadamer, while acknowledging his deep indebtedness to Heidegger, moves beyond Heidegger’s relativistic historicism to a position that is more deeply indebted to the long tradition Western philosophy beginning with Plato and Aristotle.

For Holston, Gadamer’s achievement is to offer an alternative account of human epistemology which grounds human knowledge in the facticity of human ontology. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics collapses the fact-value division which is characteristic of Enlightenment rationalism,

and, as such, combines a descriptive and normative epistemology. Holston suggests that Gadamer has described what is fundamental to any true, authentic, or genuine interpretation/understanding. To put it differently, one might say that he is describing a normatively positive category of human experience which encompasses understanding the human world in a way that abstract “scientism” cannot.

According to Holston, Gadamer’s critique of modern rationalism arises from his concern about the forgetfulness of being, and he sees that forgetfulness as characteristic of scientific inquiry (understanding “from a distance”) in which the observer is conceived as not part of the reality being observed. By calling attention to the ubiquity of “application” to present circumstances that is part of all understanding, Gadamer aims to remind us of our continuous involvement in a reality that transcends both “subject” and “object” of interpretation. That inescapable involvement of the interpreter in the reality that interpreter attempts to describe was also a key theme of our next thinker.

**Eric Voegelin** (1901–1985) is a hard theorist to summarize, as his 34 volumes of political philosophy include “multiple changes in focus and emphasis,” according to Michael P. Federici. Federici notes that Voegelin was not focused in his writing on “the Enlightenment itself but a broader intellectual genealogy of which the enlightenment was a part”. Voegelin was concerned “primarily with the rise of political religions [which were] the outgrowth of existential closure to the truth of existence”. Enlightenment rationalists were “interesting to Voegelin in so far as they contributed to the development of... the western crisis of order that inspired his work”. As Federici puts it, “Enlightenment thought has been described as the religion of reason and the religion of humanity, language that conveys Voegelin’s characterization of the enlightenment as apostatic revolt”.

Similarly to Michael Oakeshott, Voegelin understood Enlightenment rationalism to be irrational, “because it is reductionistic”. For Voegelin, Federici writes, Enlightenment rationalism, following the lead of Voltaire, takes “a part of human experience... the animal basis of existence... as its whole” so that “man’s participation in transcendent reality is eliminated from consciousness”.

“Removing consciousness of... transcendent structures from the life of human beings and human civilization eliminates the very source of order on which the ends of politics depend”. As Federici puts it, “a just political



and social order, including rational discussion on which it depends, are only possible if human beings are open to transcendent reality”.

Wendell John Coats, Jr. contends that the works of **Michael Oakeshott** (1901–1990) on rationalism, from the 1940s and 50s, “develop in detail the implications of a view of human knowledge and experience articulated initially in the more philosophic *Experience and Its Modes*”. The earlier work sets out a case that arguments from various “modes” of experience, such as science, history, and practical life, are mutually irrelevant to the advancement of other modes. For instance, a practical argument suggesting that we would be better off if we could travel faster than the speed of light should have no impact on a scientific case for whether or not such a thing is physically possible.

Coats says that “Oakeshott’s fundamental critique of [rationalism] as an approach to human activity and conduct is its partiality in the definition of ‘rationality’”. The rationalist misses the essentially poetic, and not prosaic, character of human experience. In other words, Oakeshott’s critique of rationalism is essentially an ontological one.

Jason Ferrell’s essay on **Isaiah Berlin** (1909–1997) focuses on the various ways in which Berlin deploys the term “monism” as a critique of a variety of reductionist forms of theorizing. Ferrell notes that, though Berlin associates monism with one of the primary historical traditions in Western philosophy, Platonism, Berlin extends this critique of monism to the kind of modern conceptions of moral philosophy and scientific rationalism associated with the Enlightenment. According to Ferrell, Berlin’s understanding of monism manifests his pluralist and anti-reductionist conception of the character of human experience, and is best understood as consisting of three claims. Berlin avers that monists of various stripes claim that, first, all questions have one and only one genuine or correct answer; that, second, there is a means of determining these answers; and, third, that the answers to all of the questions are compatible with one another.

Ferrell then examines three different ways in which Berlin contrasts monism with richer, more pluralistic conceptions of human activity. First, he offers an account of Berlin’s critique of the attempt to apply the methods of the natural sciences to the human sciences, especially history. Ferrell explains both Berlin’s critique of scientism and determinism in the study of human action as connected to a conflation of the notion of causality in the natural sciences, which is a logical and empirical notion, and causality in the human sciences, which is a question of making actions intelligible.

Second, Ferrell surveys Berlin's account of the character of philosophy and why monist approaches to that subject tend to get things wrong. According to Ferrell, Berlin takes philosophical questions to be those which cannot easily be classified as empirical or logical, and claims that the error of philosophical monism, especially modern "scientistic" monism, is to attempt to reduce all questions to the empirical or logical. Finally, Ferrell offers an account of Berlin's critique of political monism, which once again focuses on its fatal reductionism and its ignorance of human moral and social plurality.

Nathaneal Blake, commenting on **Russell Kirk** (1918–1994), seeks to place him in the context of the American conservative movement of the mid-twentieth century. Blake claims that Kirk's great achievement lies in his steady insistence on the fundamental limitations of human rationality, especially when that rationality is applied to social or political activity. Blake notes Kirk's Burkean opposition to schemes for collectivizing property and centralizing power, and connects that opposition to his contention that such rationalist plans fail to account for the limits of human knowledge and goodness. When implemented, they brought and continue to bring misery to millions. Against the rationalist confidence of the central planners, Kirk set tradition, which he saw as a repository of human experience and the tried and true wisdom of the past.

Blake also notes that Kirk's most famous work, *The Conservative Mind*, brought about a revival of interest in Edmund Burke and solidified Burke's reputation as the founding figure of modern conservative political thought. According to Blake, Kirk also offered unique insight into Burke's blend of natural law thinking and historical consciousness, and this blend offers valuable insights into the real working of political communities. There are real moral obligations upon us, but the mystery of human existence prevents us from delineating once and for all a perfect system of moral philosophy, or an ideal political system. Finally, Blake points out that, for Kirk, truth, whether moral, cultural or political, is apprehended as much by the imagination as by reason.

Sanford Ikeda, in his essay on **Jane Jacobs** (1916–2006), ties her critique of rationalist urban planning to Hayek's analysis of the problems facing any such planner, whether they are attempting to plan a city, an economy, or an entire social order. (This, by the way, justifies Jacobs inclusion in this volume: her concern was not *merely* with urban planning, but also with broader questions of the nature of social order.) Ikeda notes how Jacobs understood rationalist urban planners to be under a similar

egophanic spell as other prophets of utopia: “As in all utopias, the right to have plans of any significance belonged only to the planners in charge”.

Ikeda makes clear the utopian character of Jacobs’ targets in a series of sketches of their ideas; for example, Ebenezer Howard is quoted as boasting that his schemes would create “garden cities” “in which all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life, withal the beauty and the light of the country, may be secured in perfect combination”. In common with all utopians, Howard seems to lack any sense that life might involve inescapable trade-offs: he suggests we can live in a place as lively as London *and* as serene as the Lake Country. One wonders that he did not also promise that his garden cities would be both as warm as the Congo and as cool as Antarctica! Similarly, Ikeda quotes Frank Lloyd Wright’s claim that implementing his planned communities would “automatically end unemployment and all its evils forever”. And the arch urban rationalist, Le Corbusier, sought to create a “theoretically water-tight formula to arrive at the fundamental principles of modern town planning”. Again, the rationalist seeks to replace practical experience with a theory. As Ikeda concludes, all of the urban rationalists “do not appreciate the nature of a living city as an emergent, spontaneous order”.

In his chapter on **Alasdair MacIntyre** (1929–), Kenneth McIntyre (no relation) examines MacIntyre’s critique of modern rationalist moral philosophy and his attempted resuscitation of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. According to McIntyre, Alasdair MacIntyre offers not only a critique of Enlightenment rationalism, but a critique of modern moral philosophy as a whole. MacIntyre proposes a revitalization of Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics as an alternative to what he takes to be the desiccated and deracinated nature of modern deontology, utilitarianism, and emotivism. What went wrong during the Enlightenment, according to MacIntyre, was that philosophers jettisoned the anchor that tied moral rules to substantive human results, leaving practical reasoning and moral judgments unmoored to any conception of human flourishing. As McIntyre notes, for MacIntyre, as for Michael Oakeshott, the rationalist conflates practical and theoretical/scientific reasoning. For MacIntyre, this is an outcome of the modern rejection of Aristotelian teleology. As an alternative, MacIntyre offers an account of human practical knowledge which rejects the modern scientific account of human reason as primarily instrumental and technical instead of insisting that it is acquired only by an engagement in the variety of specific human practices themselves. Since to know a practice is to understand the history of that practice, a notion MacIntyre adopts from

R.G. Collingwood, there is an inherently traditional aspect in human rationality.

McIntyre offers a sympathetic account of Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of modern moral rationalism, emphasizing the importance of MacIntyre's recognition of the teleological character of a significant part of human activity, while also suggesting that his critique owes a great deal to other modern critics of moral rationalism, like Hegel and Collingwood. McIntyre also suggests that the primary weakness of MacIntyre's version of virtue ethics is that it does not adequately answer the challenges posed by modern moral pluralism to a unified conception of the human telos.

## NOTES

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).
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).



## CHAPTER 2

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# Burke on Rationalism, Prudence and Reason of State

*Ferenc Hörcher*

“Il faut... tout détruire; oui, tout détruire; puisque tout est à recréer.”<sup>1</sup>

### 1

One of the most sophisticated minds of twentieth century political philosophy seems to have completely misunderstood Edmund Burke’s frame of mind. In his magisterial work, Leo Strauss presented Burke as a historicist–relativist–particularist, almost a post-modern thinker, who did not have any long-term values, but used political rhetoric for his own purposes. He argued for the complete lack of natural law in Burke.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he found him lacking in rationality. He claimed that Burke “parts company with the Aristotelian tradition by disparaging theory and especially metaphysics. He uses ‘metaphysics’ and ‘metaphysician’ frequently in a derogatory sense.” His “opposition to modern ‘rationalism’ shifts almost

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insensibly into an opposition to ‘rationalism’ as such”.<sup>3</sup> Here we have Burke presented as the prophet of irrationalism.

There is another possible, even characteristic, opposite misunderstanding of Burke by those, who—starting out from his fierce opposition to the ideas, and even more the practice of the French Revolution—thought that he was a dogmatic thinker.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that he is an old-fashioned religious reactionary. An advocate of religious superstition and an unsubstantiated Natural Law, he is claimed to be determined to fight against social justice and progress. This is Edmund Burke, the dogmatic ideologist of religious reaction and doctrinaire natural law thinker.

This paper does not want to argue against Strauss’ interpretation of Burke, or address the problems of presenting Burke as a religious dogmatic. It simply takes it for granted, that neither was Burke a scholastic crypto-Catholic, nor a thinker of almost post-modern, or at least romantic irrationalism, who did not trust reason at all, and therefore urged his readers to set free irrational political passions.<sup>5</sup> Rather he is going to be taken here as someone convinced of the use of a constrained activity of reason in politics, and who did himself believe that practical wisdom could—on the long run—lead us to recognize those truths, which are generally labelled as the precepts of natural law. I will argue that this Burkean approach to politics is genuinely conservative (even if he himself was a Whig), or not to become anachronistic, that it is in harmony with a sceptical, British type conservatism. I will also argue that this sort of pessimistic, practical rationality is derived from the Aristotelian account of *phronesis*, which was transformed into the Roman and later Christian virtue of prudence. Finally, I will show the parallel between the prudence attributed to the successful individual human political agent, and the reason of state attributed to the early modern state.

To prove these claims I will rely on Burke’s reaction on the French Revolution, famously elaborated in the *Reflections*, his most influential political work, and will concentrate on his use of the term reason and rationality. As it will be seen, I was influenced by two classics of Burke scholarship, most importantly by the relevant works of J.G.A. Pocock, and of Francis P. Canavan, S.J., to whose positions my own is perhaps the closest.<sup>6</sup> Yet I will not try to overcome Pocock’s magisterial historical scholarship. Instead, I will try to read Burke with the intention to make him useful for our present day concerns. As for Canavan, the present chapter will position Burke closer to the British conservative tradition, more embedded in the particularities of the common law tradition and less in the Thomistic and scholastic discourse, while keeping the basic elements of a Christian Aristotelianism, that Canavan uncovered in his thought.