Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited

Edited by
Gene Callahan
Kenneth B. McIntyre

Palgrave Studies in Classical Liberalism

Series Editors
David F. Hardwick
Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Leslie Marsh
Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC, Canada

This series offers a forum to writers concerned that the central presuppositions of the liberal tradition have been severely corroded, neglected, or misappropriated by overly rationalistic and constructivist approaches.

The hardest-won achievement of the liberal tradition has been the wrestling of epistemic independence from overwhelming concentrations of power, monopolies and capricious zealotries. The very precondition of knowledge is the exploitation of the epistemic virtues accorded by society's situated and distributed manifold of spontaneous orders, the DNA of the modern civil condition.

With the confluence of interest in situated and distributed liberalism emanating from the Scottish tradition, Austrian and behavioral economics, non-Cartesian philosophy and moral psychology, the editors are soliciting proposals that speak to this multidisciplinary constituency. Sole or joint authorship submissions are welcome as are edited collections, broadly theoretical or topical in nature.

Gene Callahan • Kenneth B. McIntyre
Editors

Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Gene Callahan
New York University
Brooklyn, NY, USA

Kenneth B. McIntyre
Department of Political Science
Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, TX, USA

Praise for *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited*

"This 'sequel' to *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism* contains all the virtues of the first volume. It includes essays that not only provide an overview of many (more) critics of the Enlightenment, but also engage deeply and thoughtfully with their criticisms so as to provoke reflection on the similarities and differences among these critics across the centuries. In addition, this collection adds to the first volume by including voices from novelists, sociologists, economists, and philosophers that greatly contribute to our understanding of the tradition of the modern skepticism of rationalism."

—Jeffrey Church, *Professor and Chair of Political Science, University of Houston*, USA

"Gene Callahan's and Ken McIntyre's second volume of essays, like the first, covers a wide variety of anti-rationalist intellectuals. The collection is even more eclectic than the first volume. The eighteen essays range from analyses of the anti-rationalism of Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century and Giambattista Vico in the eighteenth, and then on through a diverse group of literary, sociological, political, economic, and philosophical writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (including, perhaps surprisingly, George Eliot and J.R.R. Tolkien), and ends with studies of two contemporary philosophers, the late Roger Scruton and John Gray. Readers of both volumes will recognize the editorial wisdom in adopting such a broad conception of Enlightenment Rationalism, a conception similar to Oakeshott's idea of modern rationalism, with its seeds sown by Bacon and Descartes in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This broad conception allows them to explore opposition strategies to the complex, multilayered contours of an intellectual fashion whose inexorable progress over the past four centuries has done so much to render contemporary public culture the arid wasteland it often seems to be. But one of the many positive messages that readers might usefully take away from the very eclectic sources examined in these volumes is the fact that so many of the thinking classes (as they used to be called) have always rejected with powerful arguments the dull mediocrity and simplistic, self-destructive ideas of our contemporary equivalents of mere sophists, economists, and calculators."

—Martyn P. Thompson, *Professor of Political Science, Tulane University*, USA

"What recommends this volume is not merely the quality of the contributions but its breadth. The variety of authors, subjects, fields, themes, and reflections here testify to the fact that reaction to Enlightenment rationalism was afoot across a spectrum of thoughtful individuals. Anyone interested in exploring insightful and lively critiques that there is a science, or a 'correct' response to the human condition, will want to read these essays."

—Eric S. Kos, *Professor of Political Science, Siena Heights University*, USA

CONTENTS

Notes on Contributors

Nathanael Blake is a postdoctoral fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Gene Callahan has a PhD in political theory from Cardiff University and a Master's in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences from the London School of Economics. He is the author of *Economics for Real People*, *Oakeshott on Rome and America* (2012), and co-editor of *Tradition v. Rationalism* (2018) and *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). He teaches at New York University.

Tyler Chamberlain lectures in Political Science at numerous universities including Simon Fraser University and Trinity Western University, teaching courses in political theory, international relations, and Canadian politics. His primary research interests are early modern political theory and Canadian political thought. He received his PhD in Political Science from Carleton University in 2018.

W. J. Coats is Professor of Government at Connecticut College where he teaches courses in the history of Western political theory, ancient, medieval, and modern. He is published widely in the field of political theory, especially with regard to the work of the twentieth-century English philosophic essayist Michael Oakeshott.

Nathan Robert Cockram is finishing a PhD in Philosophy at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. While his dissertation is in epistemology, he has a strong interest in political philosophy, and in particular, Oakeshott, Hobbes and *modus vivendi* liberalism.

Jason Ferrell teaches political theory at Concordia University, having also taught at McGill University and Mount Allison University. His research interests include the thought of Isaiah Berlin, value pluralism, and distributive justice. His articles have appeared in *Political Theory*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, and the *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. He has also authored a "Glossary of Names" for the second edition of Isaiah Berlin's *Russian Thinkers*.

Emily Finley holds a PhD in Politics from the Catholic University of America and is currently a John and Daria Barry Postdoctoral Fellow in the department of Political Science at Princeton University. Her primary research interests include the history of political thought, political ideology, epistemology, and the imagination and politics. She is the managing editor of *Humanitas*, an academic journal of politics and culture published by the Center for the Study of Statesmanship.

Justin D. Garrison is an associate professor of Political Science at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. He is a political theorist who researches the relationship between politics and the imagination. He is the author of journal articles, book chapters, and the book *An Empire of Ideals: The Chimeric Imagination of Ronald Reagan* (2015). He is also co-editor of the book *The Historical Mind: Humanistic Renewal in a Post-Constitutional Age* (2020).

Ferenc Hörcher is a research professor in Political Philosophy at the Research Institute of Politics and Government of the University of Public Service in Budapest, and senior fellow at the Institute of Philosophy of the Research Centre for Humanities, also in Budapest. His last two major publications are *The Political Philosophy of the City. From Polis through City-State to Megalopolis?* (2021) and *A Political Philosophy of Conservatism. Prudence, Moderation and Tradition* (2020). He is preparing a volume on Roger Scruton's thought on art and politics.

Charles Lowney is an assistant professor of Philosophy at Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia, USA. He received his Master's in philosophy at Boston College, where he studied Continental Philosophy, and his doctorate at Boston University, where he studied Analytic Philosophy. He is interested in applying the concepts of emergentism and tacit knowing to ethics, society, and religion, and has done so in articles such as "Authenticity and the Reconciliation of Modernity" (2009), "From Science to Morality" (2009), "Morality: Emergentist Ethics" (2010), "From Morality to

Spirituality" (2010), and in a chapter, "Four Ways of Understanding Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Silence* (forthcoming, Palgrave Macmillan, Laura Weed, ed.). Lowney is also the editor of *Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi and the Critique of Modernity: Pluralist and Emergentist Directions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Kenneth B. McIntyre is Professor of Political Science at Sam Houston State University. He is the author of *Nomocratic Pluralism: Plural Values, Negative Liberty, and the Rule of Law* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); *The Limits of Political Theory: Oakeshott's Philosophy of Civil Association* (2015); *Herbert Butterfield: History, Providence, and Skeptical Politics* (2011); the co-editor of *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and has also written essays on the philosophy of history, ordinary language philosophy, American constitutionalism, and practical reason.

Ryan Alexander McKinnell is an assistant professor of Political Science at St Francis Xavier University. He studied Political Philosophy at Carleton University, where he earned a PhD in Political Science. He has also taught at Carleton University, Concordia University, and Memorial University of Newfoundland. He has published on ancient and renaissance political thought.

Lucie Miryekta completed her PhD in Political Theory at the Catholic University of America. Her research focuses on Max Weber, Communism, and the intersection of culture and politics. She is currently working on a textbook to help American college students understand the theory and practice of Communism.

Aylin Özman is a professor of Political Science and International Relations at TED University in Ankara. Her areas of research include political theory, history of political and social thought, Turkish politics, and gender. She is the author of various articles in the *Journal of Language and Politics*, *Social and Legal Studies*, the *Journal of Third World Studies*, *Turkish Studies*, and *Contemporary Politics.*

Gülşen Seven is an assistant professor of Political Science and International Relations at TED University, Ankara, where she teaches history of political thought and contemporary political theory. She holds a PhD in Political Science and Public Administration from Bilkent University. Her research interests include realism and moralism in political theory, the concept of political judgment, and the relationship between political theory and political practice.

Luke C. Sheahan is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Duquesne University and a Non-Resident Scholar at the Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society (PRRUCS) at the University of Pennsylvania. He researches the intersection of First Amendment rights and political theory. Sheahan is author of *Why Associations Matter: The Case for First Amendment Pluralism* (2020) and he is preparing an edited volume titled *Comparative International Approaches to Free Speech and Open Inquiry* (2022).

Daniel John Sportiello is an associate professor of Philosophy at the University of Mary in North Dakota. In addition to publishing several papers and book reviews, he contributed a chapter on Eric Voegelin *to Tradition v. Rationalism* (2018) and another on Ludwig Wittgenstein to *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). In his research, he is especially interested in the ways in which ethics intersects with other subfields of philosophy.

Sarah J. Wilford researches and teaches Political Philosophy and History of Political Thought at the Universidad de los Andes, and is a researcher at SIGNOS, Universidad de los Andes in Santiago, Chile. She has taught in the Political Economy and Philosophy departments of King's College London. She has also taught at Sciences Po: Menton, Le Campus Moyen-Orient Méditerranée. Her doctoral research (PhD, King's College London) was on the political thought of Alexis de Tocqueville regarding family, women, and democratic conditions. Her other research interests include the relationship between religion and liberty in the history of political thought, womanhood during the nineteenth century, and the use of historical thinkers in modern political theory and political science.

Robert Wyllie is an assistant professor of Political Science and the director of the Political Economy program at Ashland University. His research focuses on changing conceptions of envy and inequality in the history of political philosophy, especially in the work of Benedict Spinoza and its reception. His recent work has appeared in *Constellations*, *Perspectives on Political Science*, *Polis*, and other scholarly journals.

Introduction

Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre

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

G. Callahan (✉)
New York University, Brooklyn, NY, USA
e-mail: ejc369@nyu.edu

K. B. McIntyre
Department of Political Science, Sam Houston State University,
Huntsville, TX, USA
e-mail: kmcintyre@shsu.edu

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 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 a historically loose sense, to cover not just leaders of the Enlightenment itself, but also later figures whose model of what is rational closely resembles that espoused during the Enlightenment.[1]

The chapters 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 faced by the rationalist approach to understanding, 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] 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, and Derrida), 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 Neapolitan 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 toward 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 chapter 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 of 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 toward 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. Gülşen 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 chapter on Barfield, Sarah J. Wilford offers a three-part exploration of his thought which categorizes his central contributions as concerning the importance of metaphor, meaning, and mind. Her chapter 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. Moreover, 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 C. 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 chapter, Daniel John 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 Hörcher 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 Hörcher 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 Robert 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.

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).

Conservatism and Social Criticism: Pascal on Faith, Reason, and Politics

Tyler Chamberlain

Blaise Pascal's importance as an early critic of Descartes is well documented, with most scholarly attention being given to his recovery of "knowledge of the heart" over against the primacy of autonomous reason.[1] This chapter will supplement these accounts by dwelling on the political implications of his critique of rationalism. Descartes' rationalist epistemology has political implications, some of which will be briefly explored below. Pascal's criticism of Cartesian rationalism, in turn, carries political import as well, primarily in the form of a unique articulation of conservatism.

He did not react to rationalism merely from the perspective of a skeptic or an anti-rationalist. Indeed, he directed his philosophical sights at the skepticism of Michel de Montaigne as much as at the rationalism of Descartes. A full understanding of Pascal's thought must come to terms with the nuances of his dialectical treatment of rationalism as well as skepticism. This chapter will pay special attention to the way in which Pascal

T. Chamberlain (✉)
Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, Canada
e-mail: Tyler.Chamberlain@twu.ca

responded to Cartesian rationalism, but the influence and surpassing of Montaigne will be discussed when pertinent.

Cartesian Rationalism: Epistemological and Political[2]

Descartes' infamous method of radical doubt sought to eradicate uncertainty. Only beliefs based on a secure foundation, he believed, would be reliably true and therefore useful for life.[3] Systems of knowledge are akin to architectural structures, which are only as strong as their foundation. Knowledge, therefore, must be in principle traceable to an indubitable first principle. Only this could provide the certainty required to know and master nature.[4]

Descartes says very little about what this foundationalism means for statecraft, but one passage in the *Discourse on Method* is particularly relevant. Part two of the *Discourse* justifies the foundational-architectural methodology by drawing on the examples of individual buildings and—most important for our purposes—legal-political orders. Buildings are best designed by a single architect according to a coherent blueprint, rather than being a collection of ad hoc additions and renovations that may conflict with the original plan. A good building is not the result of a historical process completed by multiple generations or perspectives, but must result from a single rational plan. Likewise, a system of thought should not develop through continued reflection on traditional theories—those of Aristotle and the scholastics, for example—but must arise at once from a single rational first principle. He goes on:

> Thus I imagined that peoples who, having once been half savages and having been civilized only little by little, have made their laws only to the extent that the inconvenience due to crimes and quarrels have forced them to do so, could not be as well ordered as those who, from the very beginning of their coming together, have followed the fundamental precepts of some prudent legislator.[5]

Descartes employed this analogy to shed light on his epistemological project, but it carries noteworthy political implications in its own right. A politics of rational first principles is contrasted with the organic development of law in response to political problems. Three relevant points are implied in the comparison of buildings, political orders, and systems of

thought. First, an organic common law politics will differ between polities, as each polity will have a different history and therefore a different set of problems that will have been addressed. Descartes' model, in contrast, would prescribe the same laws and institutions in all polities, regardless of history or local traditions. It thus leaves little room for historical and geographical contingency, preferring instead laws bearing the necessity of deductive logic. Second, organic political development is judged primarily by how well it has responded to particularistic, local problems. A politics of first principles, on the other hand, judges laws by how closely they adhere to universal standards.[6]

Third, depending on how seriously one is inclined to take Descartes' architectural analogy, the only solution to a structure built on a weak foundation is to demolish it and rebuild from the ground up. Descartes, for his part, faithfully and consistently applied the architectural metaphor in his epistemological reflections. For example, part three of the *Discourse on Method* refers to his process of "rebuilding the [epistemological] house where one is living."[7] The prospect of tearing down in order to rebuild hints at a Cartesian politics of revolution. If systems of thought must be demolished and rebuilt upon universal rational principles, and political orders can be conceptualized as analogous to systems of thought, then rationalism would seem to be a potent political phenomenon.[8]

Pascal's Critique of Cartesian Rationalism

The best point of entry into Pascal's philosophical project is a conversation he had in 1655 with Isaac de Saci, confessor at Port-Royal des Champs.[9] He argues here that philosophers have generally taken one of two approaches—dogmatism and skepticism—exemplified by Epictetus and Montaigne. Epictetus, says Pascal, had a lofty conception of man according to which he could both know and fulfill his epistemic, moral, and religious duties. Pascal accuses Epictetus of "diabolic pride" that fails to account for man's impotence.[10] Montaigne is accused of committing the equal and opposite error of emphasizing human weakness and frailty while ignoring his greatness. He "wished to discover what morals reason would dictate without the light of faith," but subjected reason to a severe Pyrrhonism that left it unable to answer philosophic or moral questions.[11] After undermining reason, Montaigne could only follow appearance and custom as the rules for life, not because they are guides to truth, but because they are as good as any other—that is, not very.

Pascal goes on to tell M. de Saci that the correct philosophical approach is not to emphasize human greatness or weakness alone, but to combine them such that man is understood as simultaneously great and wretched. This is accomplished by invoking the Christian doctrine of the fall of man, according to which man was originally great but has been corrupted. Epictetus and the rationalists understand man only through the lens of his first nature, whereas Montaigne and the skeptics see only his second nature. Pascal counsels an affirmation of both.

Though Descartes is not explicitly mentioned in the conversation with M. de Saci, in the *Pensées* Epictetus is replaced by Descartes as the principle dogmatist. Like Epictetus and other representatives of this camp, Descartes believed that men could arrive at knowledge of God, duty, and principles of nature through the power of unaided human reason. We can thus understand Pascal's later writings as pitting Montaignian skepticism against Cartesian rationalism.

The theme of the conversation with M. de Saci is revisited in the context of Cartesian rationalism in L131/S434,[12] a lengthy fragment from the *Pensées* that recounts the debate between skeptics and dogmatists and concludes that the impasse can only be resolved when man is understood in light of the Christian doctrine of the fall of man. In a notable addition to the conversation with M. de Saci, Pascal now invokes familiar Cartesian doubts concerning dreams and possible evil demons. Fragment L110/S282 further engages Descartes directly by attacking his methodological doubt and its rejection of commonsense knowledge. Pascal distinguishes between propositions, which belong to reason, and principles, which belong to the heart; the former can be rationally demonstrated whereas the latter are immediately perceived, but both have an equal claim to knowledge. While Aristotle is not explicitly named here, this argument has clear parallels with the argument for undemonstrable axioms in *Posterior Analytics* i.2–3.

Pascal suggests that there are many beliefs of which we can be certain even without having arguments in their favor. In an obvious rebuke of Descartes, the reality of the external world and our waking state are given as examples. These and other non-rational principles, being directly known through the heart, become the first principles upon which reason works and makes its deductions. There is a division of intellectual labor, in which the heart provides principles and reason discovers new propositions based on these principles. Moreover, neither faculty is equipped to judge the work of the other:

> [i]t is just as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.

Descartes' error was that he only allowed for propositions—that is, statements that could be arrived at through reasoning. Even his supposed first principle, the thinking subject, was only accepted as the result of a strict logical process.

In sum, the implication of the argument of this fragment is to limit the scope of reason, recognizing that there are truths that it cannot know but depends on for its own activity. Pascal wants to "humble reason, which would like to be the judge of everything, but not to confute our certainty." He continues: "[a]s if reason were the only way we could learn!"[13]

Pascal therefore rejects the rationalist claim that reason can be made to operate independently of, and even despite, all other sources of belief.[14] A purely rational system, if possible, would provide a universally valid set of political principles against which all polities should be judged. However, if belief originates from reason working alongside the heart, as Pascal argues, then politics will have to take factors other than universal rationalist principles into account.

Pascal's Strange Conservatism

The problems of civil war and political breakdown were at the forefront of seventeenth-century political thought. Thomas Hobbes is perhaps the clearest example, with his conception of political life as taking place in the shadow of the brutal state of nature. Descartes, too, was concerned with the threat of war and political violence. Among the scant political allusions in the *Discourse on Method* are two references to the Thirty Years' War, and his philosophical aim of setting reason on a secure foundation was explicitly for the purpose of facilitating agreement on divisive religious matters.[15] Pascal was not immune to this concern with social and political instability. The France of his childhood was "a place of seething conflict and chronic political instability."[16] King Henry IV had been assassinated in 1610 for reasons related to religious discord, resulting in the problem of royal minority as his successors took the throne at the ages of nine and four.[17] Pascal was forced to move from Paris to Clermont in 1649 to escape the Fronde, a violent uprising in response to Louis XIV's abuse of

his tax-raising authority.[18] Needless to say, political violence was a very real possibility, and as such exerted noticeable influence over his political thinking. The fleeting and tenuous nature of political order is best illuminated by L62/S177:

> *Three hosts.* What man could enjoy the friendship of the King of England [Charles I, executed 1649], the King of Poland [John Casimir, deposed but reinstated in 1656], and the Queen of Sweden [Christina, abdicated 1654], and believe that he would one day nowhere find refuge and sanctuary?

It is therefore unsurprising that scholars have noted the importance for Pascal of social order, preserving existing hierarchies in order to maintain peace, and avoiding civil war at all costs.[19] Civil war and socio-political collapse are for Pascal the greatest evils, and he worries that subjecting existing political systems to the kind of rationalist analysis Descartes calls for may weaken them to the point of breakdown. "The art of subversion, of revolution," he writes, "is to dislodge established customs by probing down to their origins in order to show how they lack authority and justice….There is no surer way to lose everything."[20] Related to this theme is Pascal's strange defense of the vanity of people who are taken in by false and unreasonable legitimations of authority. He admits that most people respect the law simply out of habit or due to magisterial shows of royalty and power; nevertheless, they do respect the law and therefore contribute to social stability.[21]

Any reason for respecting law is good enough, even vanity or the mindless acceptance of custom. L60/S294, Pascal's most sustained reflection on law and justice, begins and ends with the claim that it is good to deceive the people about the justice of the laws.[22] Law, he writes, is "self-contained," meaning that it bears no essential relation to justice or truth. It should be obeyed simply because it is the law of the land, and thus the only way to maintain social order. Throughout multiple fragments Pascal develops a theory of the origin of law in force and coercion, which by a process of becoming established and customary was eventually deemed just and right.[23] This is not a contingent historical argument, but a necessary function of the fact that force carries with it real and tangible power whereas the ideals of justice and right have no such efficacy: "If it had been possible, men would have put might into the hands of right, but we cannot handle might as we like, since it is a palpable quality, whereas right is a spiritual quality which we manipulate at will."[24] Subjecting laws to a

rationalist analysis of their first principles exposes their self-contained and coercive character, which is precisely why the common people must not know the full truth. He does not deny the reality of the non-material as such, but he does deny the extent to which the non-materiality of right can influence political things, which suggests that any post-revolutionary political order is liable to baptize might all over again, leaving us no better off.

Pascal's conservatism is, at this point in the argument, a politics of prudence that is wary of destabilizing established political institutions.[25] It is important to note that his theory of the coercive and unjust character of the law is essentially Montaignian. In his essay, "On Habit," Montaigne outlines the many ways in which the world is ruled by custom and habit, not reason or nature. Laws and social customs have no foundation other than longstanding usage. In a passage copied almost verbatim by Pascal, Montaigne writes the following of one of the customs of his day: "I traced it back to its origins: I found its basis to be so weak that I all but loathed it."[26] The conclusion drawn from the predominant influence of custom is "that each should observe [the laws] of the place wherein he lives."[27] Given his undermining of reason, discussed above, Montaigne did not believe that anyone had unfettered access to nature or true justice, so any program of socio-political reform, with its attendant risks, is bound to do more harm than good: "innovators do most harm."[28] Pascal's prudent conservatism, then, is inspired by the Montaignian-Skeptical school of philosophy.

There is, however, another theme running parallel to his support for existing structures, namely a strategy of social criticism that delivers a penetrating moral critique of existing laws. For starters, Pascal's positivist and conventionalist theory of law effectively undercuts the eternal justice of the law, insofar as it entails that what governments deem just is not in fact so. Moreover, a repeated theme of his is the injustice of wartime killing, in which murder is said to be just if the victim happens to live on the other side of an arbitrary line.[29]

Finally, we can detect something of a critique of private property rights scattered throughout the *Pensées*. Three fragments are relevant to this claim. First, L81/S299 declares that "equality of possessions is no doubt right." No argument for this strong claim is made, though L797/S310 elaborates with the similarly vague statement that "the proper function of wealth is to be freely given." A social and economic system that permits hoarding and inequality of wealth is contrary to the true purpose of wealth.