

Review

*Critics of Enlightenment
Rationalism*, edited by
Gene Callahan and
Kenneth McIntyre

TIMOTHY FULLER

Colorado College

This volume offers nineteen essays critically assessing the claims of “enlightenment rationalism” as expressed in thinkers ranging from Edmund Burke, Tocqueville and Kierkegaard to Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott and Alasdair MacIntyre. The importance of these essays is manifest in that the “enlightenment project” is now a source both of continued optimism about transforming the human condition and also of increasing pessimism in light of the ravages of the last century of our history. “Rationalism,” which emerged with Francis Bacon and Descartes in the 17th century, gained impetus in the 18th century and encouraged the Positivist faith in modern science, and the prospect of a science of society, in the nineteenth century, was dealt a severe blow occasioning disillusion in the century of total war, totalitarianism, and the technology compelling us to imagine the total destruction of the human race. One might have thought that such calamities would produce sobriety and reconsideration of claims to transform the human condition.

The essays in this volume attest that such reconsideration came to sight simultaneously with the rationalist enterprise, continues now, albeit in an intellectual climate which remains reluctant to abandon the quasi-religious faith in open-ended progress. Optimism is in contest with disillusionment and has been brilliantly described in the work of an author, not appearing in this collection, Chantal Delsol. I mention her merely to say that her work would be a welcome addition to a collection which is already admirably comprehensive.

Ferenc Horcher shows how Burke adapted the classical virtue of prudent judgment inherited from Aristotle through Christianity, showing that human reasonableness is not fulfilled but deranged in the rationalist effort to control or transcend historical contingency. He defends Burke against Leo Strauss’s critique of Burke as a relativist and historicist.

T. D. Smith and J. Jin show that Tocqueville, in his assessment of the French Revolution and the possibilities and dangers in American democracy, understood that the effort to take control of history necessarily leads to destruction of human freedom in a caricature of order.

Robert Wylie sees in Kierkegaard’s reflections on the “present age” a vision looking beyond the “present age,” perhaps indeed beyond any historic period, through poetic and religious insight, through a kind of skepticism which leads to faith, in a way using reason to combat the misplaced pretensions of reason.

J. D. Garrison offers an intriguing and rather unsettling contest between the quasi-Christian optimism of

Thomas Jefferson and Nietzsche's radical critique of the age of desacralization. Progressivism must on this account inevitably fail and yet without it modern people will fall into disarray and decline. Garrison suggests a new sort of Nietzschean inspired meritocracy of the brave who can live happily without foundation. This is certainly a critique of enlightenment rationalism but in sharp conflict with Burke's defense of the tradition. Here the tradition seems over and done with. Enlightenment rationalism goes but its triumph is to take everything else with it.

Corey Abel reflects on T. S. Eliot's invocation of tradition as a resource to be used in finding something to say that is pertinent to the present. A tradition is not fixed and formulaic. It offers a sense of structure to be learned from and adapted to what the poet or the artist wants to say. Eliot was, for example, profoundly influenced by Dante and says as much in talking of his effort in "Four Quartets." The rationalist is prone to believe that success lies in separation from all antecedents even though without them it would be impossible to begin anything. Even in opposition to what came before one is dependent on that to take one's bearings.

Daniel Sportiello's reflections on Wittgenstein suggests that explanations and justifications are forms of neuroses, efforts to give the appearance of rationality to what is simply what we have come to do. This is certainly a critique of rationalism, but it suggests that the function of reason is to show that most of what we do is not reasonable even if unavoidable.

Jack Simmons shows that Heidegger, in his questioning of technology, identified a narrowing of understanding to what can be expressed technologically. Modern science and technology reveal something to us about our situation which is real but, in consequence, narrows the notion of what is real, concealing the full dimension of human participation in, receptivity to, Being.

Steven Knepper invokes Gabriel Marcel, a too neglected French thinker at present. Like Heidegger he criticizes the dominance of technological rationalism for its relegation of tradition to the realm of mere curious survivals from a past that, it is claimed, is over and done with. The result is a decreasing capacity to enter into loving relations with other human beings as we reduce our understanding to sociological characteristics or types, reinterpreting personhood as observable data.

C. W. Lowney reminds us of the scientist Michael Polanyi's defense of personal knowledge and tacit knowing as integral even to scientific investigation. There are the procedures of scientific investigation of course but they cannot be entirely separated from the capacity for insightful interpretation that distinguishes the scientist from the technician.

Luke Sheahan reminds us of C. S. Lewis's warning against the "abolition of man" by which he meant, among other things, the reduction of human activity to objects of detached investigation, believing that human beings merely express emotional responses to the world, not attaching to a perceptible order of reality. The result is a destructive contest of emotional responses for dominance, the irrationality of rationalism.

Nick Cowen reminds us of Friedrich Hayek's insight into our inability to gain a comprehensive map of social order and hence the failure of all attempts at centrally designing and imposing order on the myriad individual choices that humans make in their continuous interactions.

Ryan Holston discusses Gadamer's method of interpretation which involves method in service to what is revealed as true. Gadamer acknowledges the modern emphasis on historical consciousness, recognizing that we must, in some degree, translate what we find in Plato and other great thinkers to some degree into our idiom. This is not, however, to render a judgment on them. Rather, it is to revitalize our dialogue with them, to preserve what they have to tell us.

Michael Federici shows us that Eric Voegelin understood the Enlightenment project to be a revolutionary movement to replace traditional religion with a new kind of religiosity that defies humanity as self-defining agents, capable of liberation from the Classical and Judeo-Christian tradition. As with many of the authors here considered, the narrowing of the conception of truth and reality, the revulsion against the mystery of life, is a central theme.

John Coats continues this theme in his account of Michael Oakeshott's critique of rationalism, most widely known in his seminal essay, "Rationalism in Politics." Coats rightly reminds us of Oakeshott's dis-

inction between the “how” and the “what” of any developed human activity. There may be a set of rules or guidelines to be considered in pursuing a distinctive activity. These might be written down in a manual. However, in the actual conduct of the activity the rules must be interpreted, put into practice, in their particular applications. One might have a guidebook on how to teach an effective class. But any teacher knows, as soon as the class begins, that the rules without actual experience won’t get one very far. One might want to cook like Julia Child and need her cookbook to begin. This does not guarantee what one produces is what the recipe projects. In Polanyi’s “personal knowledge” Oakeshott saw a kindred spirit.

Jason Ferrell reflects on Isaiah Berlin’s critique of “monism” and his defense of “pluralism.” By the latter Berlin meant that there may be absolute values such as “liberty” and “equality” but, while both valid, they cannot in practice be perfectly reconciled but only brought into imperfect reconciliation, continually in need of revised mediation. In these circumstances reason is essential but continually in confrontation with what exceeds reason’s capacity.

Nathaniel Blake reminds us of Russell Kirk’s profound reverence for inherited tradition as a necessary source for gaining our bearings in historical existence. American constitutionalism offered a way to achieve both union and defense against centralized power leading to tyranny. The modern departures from that tradition often represent the hubris of the rationalist for whom every predicament is actually a “problem” for which there must be an adequate “solution.”

Sanford Ikeda introduces Jane Jacobs who engaged most directly in the practicalities of urban planning, illustrating application in practice reservations about understanding our lives together as purely technical matters. One might think of the paradoxical results of “urban renewal” in cities like Chicago and be grateful to Jacobs for showing us that intelligence must be coupled with sympathies for the cultural conditions the planners propose to “rationalize.”

Kenneth McIntyre, in the concluding essay of this volume, reprises Alasdair McIntyre’s profound, comprehensive critique of virtually all modern moral philosophy. In his darkest moment, McIntyre famously remarked that we need a new St. Benedict, suggesting that brightly illuminated modernity is really a new kind of dark age. McIntyre did advocate a renewed form of Aristotelian thinking for which Kenneth McIntyre has sympathy, but he points out that Alasdair McIntyre is not so far removed in his critique from what many authors discussed in this volume have argued. In part, what distinguishes him is the vehemence of his critique.

In sum, this is a most useful handbook to guide us in rethinking the circumstances of the present age, offering deeper understanding of it, but, consistently with the critique of rationalism, not pretending to have the final answer to what is required of us.