

Rationalism in Society: How Rationalism Fails Us

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Rene Descartes was the first to speculate on rationalism in the seventeenth century, basing it upon the idea that the only thing that could ever be known is the mind. Descartes believed that it was possible that there are two worlds: one of the mind and one of the physical world. He further believed that the mind was the 'real' world, because only by having certainty can you have real knowledge. As he cannot know for certain that the physical world is not a figment of his imagination, he discards it in favor of reason. Descartes's rationalism is the emotionally detached way of finding truth, by which we are limited to the power of our reasoning rather than the study of judgment, morals, or expertise (Lacewing). Fundamental to his beliefs, the Rationalist seeks to break apart the steps to an action, so that it may be replicated by others. He desires to find a common rule for the world, and to apply it seamlessly to all situations that he may find. If he can do this, he has found certainty, and therefore, truth. But there is no certain recipe for success from the first effort. No master of his craft can tell any beginner how to do something exactly as he does, and expect his apprentice to understand the process simply from the steps. Were Michelangelo to hand his tools to the nearest bystander, along with a set of explicit directions on the techniques of painting, that randomly chosen man could not paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He would be unable to craft the *David*, or to be among the men who defined the Renaissance art style. His attempts would be a clumsy imitation of what Michelangelo brought to life, and would have been painted over by a more qualified artist.

If the rationalist's reasoning is followed, there is no cause for the man's failure. He was, after all, given the same tools as Michelangelo, and from the artist's own hands. He was further given a set of directions made by a successful painter telling him exactly how to how to paint the ceiling. Perhaps the bystander had not followed the instructions as he should have. Perhaps he neglected steps, or did not care to put forth the effort. A rationalist might be able to argue this. But he cannot avoid the fact that there was only one Michelangelo in all of history. If artistry could be set down as rules, then the bystander could be Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo Da Vinci, or any artist. What's more, none of these artists would have been of any note because they would be easily imitated. People have devoted their lives to studying artistic works, and even they are unable to set forth guidelines on how to become Michelangelo. Certainly, they can imitate him, but that is not the same as being a great artist. Artistry then cannot be taught through rationality. But what about more day-to-day affairs?

Picture young parents. At the announcement of pregnancy, they are immediately flooded with well-intended, unsolicited advice from parents, friends, and strangers on how to raise a child. There are opinions on every side about natural birth, co-sleeping, breast feeding, and how to speak to a baby. Often these directions differ. The grandmother-to-be might inform her daughter that co-sleeping will create an unhealthy dependency. A best friend might say that it is the best way to keep the baby quiet at night. The woman at the checkout counter might inform the young mother that more babies are suffocated during co-sleeping than at any other time. Desperate for answers, new parents turn to guidebooks written by so-called experts on child-rearing. And even these authorities disagree with each

other! After literally thousands of studies on children and their development, there is still no manual that will tell parents step-by-step how to raise a baby to a successful adult.

Rationalism will plague that baby throughout his life. A baby who could not be categorized by any number of experts reaches grade school, where he is given a series of milestones. Each one measures at what age each child should learn to read, to write, to do sums, and to understand sciences. The children are all given the same set of directions, and placed in a group to learn according to rules set for them. If a student fails, procedure is not adjusted to his needs. He is instead placed in a group meant for “special needs.” Rather than acknowledge that there may be a problem in the school system, that perhaps a one-size-fits-all system cannot to be applied to seven-year-olds, officials conclude that their set of rules for education is not yet complete.

This has been made apparent in recent history. In 2010 the state of Pennsylvania adopted the federal government created common core teachings, which have not been successful in teaching children the essentials they need for college (PSBA. 2014). They have brought students, parents, and teachers alike great frustration. The common core system is ineffective because it relies on theory rather than practice. Students in high school are to read less fiction under the common core than most previous high school graduates have. Many challenging texts, such as *Moby Dick*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Oliver Twist*, are eliminated from curricula. In the past, these books were studied to teach students how to analyze and interpret. Mathematics standards have also dropped, cutting off the path to take Algebra in 8th grade. Under common core, the statistics for 8th graders taking Algebra has dropped from 33 percent to 29 percent: the first drop in 10 years. While inessential to graduating, an early start in mathematics is important for students who hope to go on to

math and science majors in college. Already SAT score averages have dipped for the first time since 2007 (The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal). For decades, the SAT has been the measure of a student's preparedness for college. As scores from students decline, it creates the alarming possibility that they are not as prepared for college as they were under a different curriculum. Common core seeks to eliminate the problem it created by forcing universities to take on students who are not qualified to take the math expected of them. Since the common core has only been in effect since 2014, it is too early to say with certainty the effects it will have, but the outlook is not hopeful (The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal).

Colleges and universities will not be the same as they were before, as they must lower their standards in order to allow students to graduate in the planned four-year track. The rationalism that politicians employ will affect these colleges directly and negatively. As graduates are released into the professional world, they find themselves incapable of completing the same tasks as their seniors. Certainly, they may learn a lot of what they need to know on the job, but they already paid literally tens of thousands of dollars each to colleges to provide this education—colleges that were supposed to prepare them for careers instead of pushing them out to the real world, where lessons are hard-learned and may have severe consequences.

Eventually, the student will realize how he has been cheated by the system. He will demand better for future generations. In response, educators and politicians will scramble to find a rational solution, and only plunge themselves deeper into the problem. Instead of seeking the root of the problem, they prefer to ignore the faults in their logic and instead find even more convoluted and ineffective methods, all the while insisting that this time

will be different. They are willing to ignore the needs of schools and colleges in order to appear effective.

Officials have failed to construct the rule book that rationalism seeks for education and career. As in the example of Michelangelo, something is missing from the method: experience. For anyone to be really good at anything, to know what he studies, he must know the background of his field, he must practice, and he must learn from his mistakes. Few people are able to simply read the instructions to fix their car, and then fix the rattling sound emitting from beneath the hood. Meanwhile, a mechanic is capable of diagnosing and fixing the same problem within hours. Some things cannot be taught through printed instructions, no matter how careful the writer is to include every detail.

Intuitively, we know that rationalism is not the best choice for a society. It is faulty from the first solution, and creates more problems as the rationalist flounders blindly for answers against the problems in his faulty logic. Worse, as Michael Oakeshott, in his essay "Rationalism in Politics," argues that rationalism leads to moral decay because the moral life is "not a habit of reflective thought, but a habit of affection and conduct." Conduct, he argues, produces similar results with or without reflection of choices and reasons (Oakeshott 61). It removes many paths simply by adhering to what the person decides is morally reasonable. This morality is given to us at birth, and is a sense of right and wrong that will not lead the practitioner astray as rationality does. Morality is later fostered by a proper education, which leads the individual to a well lead life. Rather than spending his life stumbling around in the darkness of his own mind for answers, for a guide that will tell him the answer to every situation, the individual follows his inner compass, forgetting about the rules of navigation and simply acting by habitual nature. He does not make

decisions by checking off a list of rules, but by doing what he judges to be best in his current circumstance.

Oakeshott further argues that while parts of the moral life might collapse, a person's code of conduct would rarely recognize it, as it never acknowledged a system of rules (Oakeshott 63). This is the opposite of the rationalist's system. Were any part of his rule proved false, he would be forced to reevaluate the entirety of it, so as to make it complete and comprehensible once more. A morally conducted life has a resilience and elasticity that a rigidly ordered rulebook cannot have. Morality can carry one through many decisions without error, because it relies on a sense of judgment rather than a certain knowable event. One of the greatest challenges of life is its unpredictability. Any one of us could wake up in the morning, and prepare for the day, thinking that it would be a repeat of the day before. But we rarely consider the possibility that this day might be different. A car accident, winning the lottery, war breaking out, or meeting someone can change your entire life in a way that could not have been predicted. Rationalism cannot guard against this. Few of us have read a book which tells us how to deal with a sudden catastrophe that resolved the problem as the author said it would. Even something as simple as going to college, an act performed by millions of young adults every year, is not something that can be easily contained inside a *101 Things to Know about College* book because life is unpredictable and human knowledge is limited. Rules for every occasion cannot be made when the knowledge to confront the matter has not been gained.

Rationalism in everyday life is inadequate. By the time the individual has found the answer to his problem, the chance to enact his solution has passed him by completely. Neither does he truly have a solution, only an ineffective transformation of the problem.

Oakeshott puts his argument this way: “First, we do our best to destroy parental authority (because of its alleged abuse), then we sentimentally deplore the scarcity of ‘good homes,’ and we end by creating substitutes which complete the work of destruction.” (Callahan)

Any principal of a school can claim that the students in his district need more funding, a better curriculum, and that if these things are provided, the entire community will be better off for it. It may not matter to him that his teachers are ineffective or that there are problems in administration. The United States government itself fails in this way. While problems such as poor education, overpopulated cities, and lack of feasible healthcare come up, the government desperately attempts to patch up the holes, all the while making problems worse. The government creates poor answers to the problems that society presents it with.

For example, with the loss of farmlands, the state of Pennsylvania created Farmland Preservation, by which they pay farmers to keep farming. This program alone cost Pennsylvania taxpayers nearly 36 million dollars in 2016 (Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture 13). Due to overpopulated cities, cities and governments provided public transportation, which is too time consuming and inconvenient for most people’s usage.

When the Great Depression came about, food programs were begun, and never ceased, leading to a wealth of welfare programs which provide much-needed benefits to some, but enable others to avoid accountability for their habits. When food stamps were complained against, as it could be difficult to prepare food with a disability, Meals on Wheels was created to send ready-made food to those who were unable to provide for themselves, but most complained that the meals tasted terrible. President Trump began the course to shut the program down, which caused outrage at the idea that some would be deprived of the prepared food. The whole matter could have been avoided if food stamps had been adjusted to pay for prepared food at the grocery store in the first place. Still more programs have

only worsened the people's problems. Obamacare took two years of legislative work, and was meant to make healthcare more accessible by making health insurance mandatory. The program skyrocketed the price of insurance plans, and made it harder for Medicare patients to receive care (Book). In response to complaints, President Trump began attempting to repeal the Affordable Care Act in 2017. These programs have helped plunge our country into 20 trillion dollars of debt, a sum that will be almost impossible to repay.

Despite all these problems, our society is being transformed by rationalism. Morals are abandoned as inconvenient to modern life. Perhaps the great appeal of rationalism is that it allows any one of us to step back from a disaster, raise our hands in surrender, and cry that no rule has ever been made for this occasion. We can claim that without the answer given to us, we cannot be expected to know the outcome of our actions. Rather than seeing this as a cause to put aside rationalism, rationalists use it as a reason to continue to employ the systematic rule development. Rationalists claim that given time to think, they will be able to come up with the answer for all of man's problems. Society has abandoned the working system of morally made decisions in favor of the idea of absolute order, easily found answers, and the knowledge of the future. For if there are rules made for every decision, then the future is not an adventure of exploring talents, discovering passions, or of learning things that no one else can know. Life instead becomes a dependable, predictable walk throughout existence in which everyone is special, no one is accountable, and human logic carries them through every difficulty.

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