

A Warning about So-Called Rationalists

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Have you ever heard of rationalism and rationalists? If so, have you wondered what these words mean?

A rationalist is someone who believes that reason is the most reliable way to arrive at knowledge. Nowadays you sometimes hear about scientists or other people who call themselves rationalists. Most of these “rationalists” actually are not rationalists at all. They, or their followers, are using the word “rationalist” wrongly.

Most so-called “rationalists” today fall into one of these three categories (and many of them fall into all three categories at once):

- (1) Religious skeptics, who don't believe in God and don't like religion.
- (2) Skeptics about unusual happenings (such as alleged paranormal phenomena).
- (3) People who refuse to believe anything that isn't backed up by scientific evidence.

People who fall into these three categories usually are not rationalists at all! In fact, people who fall into the third category *never* are rationalists. I will now explain why this is the case. For convenience, I am dividing this explanation into three parts, to match the three categories of so-called “rationalists” in the list I just gave.

Point 1. Rationalism Isn't Disbelief in God or Religion

Some atheists and agnostics attribute their lack of religious belief to their “rationalism.” This is wrong. Rationalism, by itself, does *not* say there is no God. It is

possible to be a rationalist and believe in God. Some of the leading rationalist philosophers of the past, such as René Descartes and George Howison, believed in a supreme being of some sort. There is nothing logically inconsistent in believing that reason is the main source of knowledge, and simultaneously believing that reason supports the existence of God.

Today, most so-called rationalists claim there is no rational evidence for the existence of God. However, these “rationalists” usually have a rather fuzzy idea about what counts as rational evidence. Often, what they mean is that there is no *scientific* evidence for the existence of God. Actually, it is possible to have good *rational* evidence for a belief without having any scientific evidence at all! (If this idea is new to you, see Point 3 below.)

Since rationalism doesn’t imply disbelief in God, skeptics of category (1) (the atheists and agnostics) can’t pass off their skepticism as a part of rationalism.

Point 2. Rationalism Isn’t Disbelief in Controversial Phenomena

Many skeptics who disbelieve in psychic and paranormal phenomena seem to think that disbelief in these is part of “rationalism.” When you read about these skeptics, you sometimes get the feeling that “rationalism” is just another name for disbelief in ESP.

In this short essay, I am not going to take up the controversial question of the reality of the paranormal. I only wish to say this, to believers and skeptics alike: Disbelief in the paranormal is *not* the same as rationalism! Rationalism is compatible with complete disbelief in the paranormal, but rationalism also is consistent with some forms of belief in the paranormal. Here’s why:

It is logically consistent to believe that reason is the main source of knowledge, but also to admit other, subsidiary sources of knowledge, like personal experience. Rationalists normally take this position in real life. (No reasonable rationalist would say that when I look at my clock, I can’t possibly know that it’s about 8:30—even though the knowledge that it’s about 8:30 comes from experience and not from reason.) If a rationalist can admit personal experience as a source of knowledge, then it is possible, in

principle, for a rationalist to admit things like ESP experiences as sources of knowledge. A rationalist who does this will not automatically be guilty of logical inconsistency.

Please note that I am *not* telling anyone to believe in ESP. (Skeptics, reread the last sentence before you break out your typewriters! It would be silly at best, and dishonest at worst, to read this essay and then claim I am arguing for ESP.) For that matter, I am not telling anyone to disbelieve in ESP, either. I am only using this possible combination of beliefs—rationalism and ESP—as an example to show that rationalism, by itself, doesn't automatically force you to disbelieve in all paranormal phenomena.

Also, it's possible to disbelieve in the paranormal for reasons having nothing to do with rationalism. For example, some religious believers argue that telepathy doesn't exist, on the grounds that their religion (which they believe in for nonrational reasons) teaches that only God can read one's thoughts.

It is possible to believe in rationalism either with or without belief in the paranormal. Also, it is possible to believe in the paranormal either with or without belief in rationalism. None of these combinations of beliefs will force you automatically into logical inconsistency. Yet most "rationalist" skeptics seem to think their disbelief in the paranormal is a consequence of rationalism! Actually, their disbelief is a consequence of their faith in scientific methods. These "rationalists" believe that science has debunked the paranormal; they also believe that rationalism requires us to believe what science tells us. Therefore, they believe that rationalism rules out belief in the paranormal. But this conclusion rests on a bad argument. Even if you believe that science has debunked the paranormal, the argument still is bad—because rationalism does *not* automatically require us to believe what science tells us. (To find out why, read point 3 below.)

Since rationalism, by itself, does not rule out belief in the paranormal, the skeptics of category 2 can't pass off their skepticism as a necessary consequence of rationalism.

As I said earlier, this is *not* an argument for paranormal belief. It is only an argument about the relationship of rationalism to paranormal belief.

Point 3. Rationalism Isn't Belief in "Nothing but Science"

Rationalists believe that reason is the primary means for arriving at reliable knowledge. Skeptics in category (3) believe that science is the main, or the only, way of arriving at reliable knowledge. These two beliefs are not the same! There are two reasons why they are not the same:

Reason #1: Scientific methods are not entirely rational.

Science is not entirely a rational process. The act of getting scientific ideas can involve intuitive leaps; scientists make use of intuition in finding hypotheses to test. This much is well known. However, the nonrational character of science goes much deeper than this. Although science is a great way to gain knowledge, scientific confirmation lacks a rigorous logical basis!

Philosophers of science have long known that scientific confirmation involves the use of assumptions and methods that have no clear logical justification. For example, many people believe that scientific confirmation makes use of inductive reasoning. However, experts in logic have been unable to find a rigorous basis for inductive reasoning! Mathematical logicians have been studying the problem of justifying induction for a long time without finding any decisive reason to believe in induction. Rational, critical-minded philosophers (especially David Hume) began casting doubt on inductive reasoning hundreds of years ago. So far, no one has found a truly convincing way out of this doubt. These facts may be shocking to science-lovers who think of science as a logical and rational process. Apparently, scientific confirmation is not a form of logical inference, as many people once believed.

Some philosophers of science, such as Karl Popper, have argued that science does not need inductive reasoning, and that scientific confirmation is based on other kinds of reasoning. But despite the best efforts of logicians and other philosophers, no one has yet come up with a satisfactory purely logical foundation for scientific inference. The assumption that scientific methods yield reliable knowledge may be useful, worth

believing in, and even true. However, this assumption is not logically justifiable. Anyone who has confidence in science must somehow deal with the fact that scientific methods cannot be justified in a purely logical way.

Another place where nonrational thinking enters scientific confirmation is in the principle of parsimony—otherwise known as “Occam’s Razor.” This is the principle that an explanation which does not assume the existence of extra, unproven items is preferable (all else being equal) to an explanation that assumes such items. This principle has been exceedingly useful as a guide to thinking up new explanations for natural phenomena. However, it is not a principle that one can justify through logic alone. Many skeptics seem to feel that Occam’s Razor is the very essence of rationality. Actually, Occam’s Razor is not a principle that we can justify by purely logical means.

None of the criticisms that I have made here are criticisms of science! They are only criticisms of certain false views of science. Personally, I have faith in science. I have great confidence in science’s ability to solve humanity’s material problems. It makes me angry when people claim that science is worthless or bad (as certain ignorant humanities professors and political extremists have done). But despite my confidence in science, I do not think that one can justify scientific methods through purely rational means.

Probably the skeptics will call me an antiscientist, and even nastier names, for daring to say that science is not 100 percent rational. But I am not being antiscientific. All I am saying is that science, despite its usefulness, plausibility, and past successes (and despite my love of it!), cannot sensibly be regarded as a rational process. Science is not a branch office of reason. Science makes extensive use of reason, but it is not exclusively rational.

Thus, the skeptics who believe that science is the only trustworthy form of knowledge have no business calling themselves rationalists.

Reason #2: Reason is not restricted to science.

Today’s “rationalists” often seem to think that if science can’t confirm a belief, then that belief is irrational or otherwise bad. These skeptics ignore the simple fact that reason is much larger and wider than the special kinds of reasoning used in science. To prove

this, I need only point to the entire subject of philosophy. Philosophers have used rational arguments to support important conclusions that science can neither prove nor disprove. In fact, one can think of philosophy as the study of questions that reason can approach, but that scientific methods cannot settle. Readers familiar with philosophy may know of D.M. Armstrong's work on abstract objects, Eli Hirsch's work on identity, and Charles Hartshorne's work on religious ideas. One need only think about these three outstanding examples to realize that there is more to reason—and I mean the good, competent, careful, scholarly use of reason—than science ever can encompass.

Skeptics who hold a “nothing but science” view of human knowledge will likely respond to this argument by repeating old myths about how philosophy isn't as good as science. Some skeptics like to say that philosophers can't agree on anything, that philosophy is impractical, and so forth. But anyone familiar with the real literature of philosophy, and especially that of modern analytic philosophy, will realize that these old myths are false. It is true that there are many problems that philosophy has yet to solve. Philosophers do disagree over solutions to these problems. However, for most of these problems, philosophers have managed to narrow down the range of potential solutions and to gain much clarity and understanding about the ideas involved in the problems. If philosophy has progressed more slowly than science, perhaps this is because science deals with subject matter that is much easier to study. Science studies the physical world, which is observable, dissectable, and subject to experimentation. Philosophy studies a set of excruciatingly subtle fundamental ideas, on which experiments are impossible.

Since science is not the only rational form of knowledge, skeptics of category 3 (those who approve only scientifically confirmed beliefs) can't pass off their skepticism as a necessary consequence of rationalism. The traditional name for the belief that science is the only form of knowledge is “scientism.” Scientism is not the same as rationalism. Indeed, scientism has no rational justification.

We now see that skeptics of kinds 1, 2 and 3 cannot blame their skeptical ideas on rationalism. These skeptics are simply abusing the name of an old and honorable philosophical tradition. If you meet a rationalist today, watch out. It's possible that you

have met a disciple of reason. But nowadays, it's more likely that you've met someone who has stolen a once-respectable word, and who may (in a purely philosophical sense) be trying to pick your pocket!