



Without self-enquiry, rationalism is just another superstition



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Rationalism was meant to be a method, not an identity. It was to be the discipline of honest seeing, not another tribe of the like-minded. You question, you examine, you see clearly. You hold no belief sacred, no authority exempt, including your own. Every conclusion must justify itself, and if it cannot, you let it go: that is the original promise. From the Greek sceptics to the Enlightenment philosophers to the modern scientific temper, this is what rationalism has always claimed as its essence: the courage to ask, the willingness to discard, the refusal to bow before any idea simply because it is old or revered or comfortable.

This inheritance has served humanity well: superstition loosened its grip, the tyranny of priests and kings could be challenged, and questions forbidden for centuries could finally be asked. Science, medicine, law, and political freedom all owe something to this spirit of inquiry. To be sure, there are rationalists who already practise what this essay calls for: who hold conclusions lightly, who examine their own motivations, who do not need the identity of 'rational person' to feel secure. This essay is not addressed to them. It is addressed to those who have made reason into a fortress rather than a discipline.

Somewhere along the way, the rationalist method itself became an identity. Rationalism stopped being something you do and became something you are. To call oneself rational became a badge, a tribe, a source of pride and belonging. And the moment rationalism became identity, it could no longer examine itself, for the ego does not question its own hiding places. When the questioner himself is never questioned, rationalism quietly shifts its role. It stops being an instrument of truth and becomes an instrument of the ego. What was meant to liberate becomes a fortress; what was meant to clarify becomes a tribal flag.

The Outward Gaze

Without self-enquiry, rationalism turns outward only. It scrutinises religion, superstition, tradition, politics, and the beliefs of others, but it never pauses to examine the psychological centre doing the scrutinising. The ego remains untouched, and rationality becomes its armour.

Watch the rationalist in action. He will tell you precisely why the pilgrim is wasting his time at the temple, but he cannot tell you why he himself spent three hours last night arguing with strangers on the internet. He will explain the cognitive biases that make people believe in astrol-

ogy, yet he has never once examined the compulsion that makes him need to correct them.

This is the fatal flaw. Reason directed only outward is not complete reason; it is half-reason with the illusion of completeness.

The religious believer at least knows he believes. The rationalist who has made reason into identity does not know he believes; he thinks he merely sees. And so his beliefs operate unchecked, unexamined, all the more powerful for being invisible to himself.

Here, rationalism becomes belief in reason, not the use of reason. The distinction is crucial. The use of reason is alive, flexible, self-correcting; it holds conclusions lightly, knowing that new evidence or deeper insight may require revision.

Belief in reason is something else entirely. It is reason frozen into dogma, producing certainty rather than clarity, positions rather than understanding, debates rather than insight. The believer in reason has made rationality into a flag, and he will defend that flag as fiercely as any religious zealot defends his scripture. His rationalism has become, in everything but name, a faith.

The Psychology Beneath the Logic

Such rationalism is often loud, combative, and moralistic; it seeks victory, not truth. The vocabulary has changed: we now speak of 'evidence-based' and 'peer-reviewed' instead of 'revealed' and 'ordained'. But the psychological posture is identical. It replaces gods with data, scriptures with graphs, priests with experts. The structure remains the same; only the vocabulary has been updated.

Rationalism without self-enquiry cannot see its own motivations. Fear, insecurity, superiority, the need to be right: these operate freely beneath the language of logic. The rationalist believes he is defending truth, but he does not see that he is defending himself.

This is why the most aggressive rationalists so often resemble the fundamentalists they oppose. The content differs: God versus no God, scripture versus science, tradition versus progress. But the structure is the same. Both need certainty, both need enemies, both cannot tolerate ambiguity, and both derive identity from their conclusions.

In this condition, rationalism becomes collective prejudice in modern dress. Any community that prides itself on rational thinking quickly develops orthodoxies as rigid as any religious sect.

In certain Western rationalist circles, approved conclusions function as membership tests. Deviate, even carefully and with evidence, and you are not refuted but reclassified: you become a denier, someone who has 'revealed their true colours'. Among several Indian rationalists, the pattern mirrors. One must hold the correct contempt for all religion and the correct suspicion of all tradition. Suggest that an ancient text contains genuine philosophical insight, and you risk being treated as a communal apologist.

In both cases, the permitted conclusions are known in advance, and argument exists not to discover truth but to police boundaries.

The Inward Turn

True rationality is inseparable from self-enquiry. The moment reason turns inward and asks, "Why do I need this conclusion? What does this belief give me psychologically?", rationalism regains its original power.

The question is not merely "Is this true?" but "Why do I want it to be true? What fear would arise if it were false?"

This is the questioning the ego cannot survive. It can survive any external argument; it can change positions, update beliefs, switch tribes, and remain fundamentally intact. What it cannot survive is being seen.

The rationalist who has never asked, "What am I really doing when I argue?", who has never noticed the pleasure in being right, the fear of being wrong, has never used reason fully. He has used reason the way a child uses a stick, to hit things and feel powerful, not as a surgeon uses a scalpel: to cut through illusion, beginning with his own.

When self-enquiry accompanies rationalism, everything changes. Positions become lighter and can be revised without trauma. Disagreement becomes information rather than attack. Uncertainty becomes tolerable because identity no longer depends on knowing. This is reason restored to its original purpose: not a weapon for victory but a light for seeing. And that light must fall on the one who holds it, not only on the objects he chooses to examine.

Without that inward turn, rationalism is not liberation; it is merely a sophisticated cage. The bars are elegant, the locks are logical, and the prisoner is convinced he is free because he can critique the cages of others.

This is the final irony: the one who prides himself on questioning becomes the one who cannot be questioned. The identity of "questioner" becomes the most protected possession of all. Liberation is not a change of content; it is freedom from the need to cling to any content. The liberated mind can hold positions without being held by them, can use reason without being used by the ego's need for reason.

This liberation is not achieved by abandoning rationalism; it is achieved by completing it, by turning the light that has illuminated so much of the external world, finally, uncompromisingly, on the one who holds the light. So the question returns to you: What am I defending? What am I afraid of? Who would I be if I could no longer call myself rational?

You have spent years examining everything except the examiner. That exemption is the source of your bondage. Begin there. That is the only beginning worth the name.



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