

***Reply to "The Rationality of Extremists" by John Wettersten***  
**Joseph Agassi, Tel Aviv University and York University, Toronto**

Wettersten investigates rationality. He begins with the principle of rationality; action is always explained as the outcome of some rational decision. Two or three disputes traditionally surround this principle.

The first dispute is, whether the rationality principle applies to successful action alone or to any action. Of course, assuming that an action was successful one can conclude that its goal – or at least its partial goal — is what it has reached. Obviously, failure is as common as success if not much more so. Is failure to be explained as due to rational action? The idea that rationality is proof led to the conclusion that in principle suffice it to view only successful action as rooted in rationality. This is obviously too strict a position. Using our brains to plan actions must count as rational even if misguided, as all our cogitations are likely to be.

The second dispute was about the conditions surrounding a decision: can these include social settings even though these are given rather than rationally constructed? Again, decision goes the social way and this is more-or-less decided (even though it is the minority view, like most of what we may deem avant-garde): irrational assume social institutions surely are, the rational takes them into considerations either when acting within their rule or when trying to improve them, say by legislation.

The third dispute is as to whether the rationality principle applies not only to individuals but also to societies. The latter view allows for social or historical forces, for destiny and such. We can ignore this and agree that only individuals act, not societies and not social institutions. We do observe mass movements and notice that in mass movements interactions between individuals are so strong that they make masses of people move in unison so that the mass seems to have its own purpose. Whether we deem mass movements rational or not, we tend to view the actions that move them as of individuals in them, not of the masses as such. (Thus societies and institutions are not reducible to individuals but social or institutional actions are.) This idea becomes less obvious when we consider not the movement of a mass of people (often called a herd with unjust contempt) but such items as the national interest, since they are institutions that often reflect a majority view of the view of the leadership and similar institutionally-determined groups of individuals.

Here, Wettersten has introduced his own innovation. In classical, strictly individualist social science, the goal of any individual is given (as exogenous). This was justified as liberal: we do not impose a goal on individuals, as they possess the inalienable right to their tastes. It was also justified in a naturalist way: we all have more-or-less the same basic needs and our chief aims are to satisfy them in reasonable ways. Wettersten says, more reasonably, we must agree that our tastes too are largely socially determined. We all must eat, but our tastes in food vary, and they are largely determined socially! Thus even the most basic individual needs are not independent of their given societal frameworks. Moreover, given any demand one makes on oneself or on the environment in which one acts, there is always the question of how high it is. And this too is largely socially determined. One such case of high standard is that of extremism: the extremist raises some standard as far as possible.

And so we come to the question at hand: what is the rationality of extremism? This question gains import in the light of the fact that some people may alter their views and attitude and remain extremist; indeed they may alter their views and attitudes in search of extreme standards that they may aspire to. As individualism may lead investigators to play down the role of social environment in action, it leads its adherents to psychology. They may then adopt the view of Alfred Adler that people who fear failure raise their stakes as much as possible, thus, paradoxically, insure failure. Moreover, they may act obsessively that way. (This is not to say that the adoption of Adlerian psychology imposes the individualist mode of explanation. Indeed, Adler himself was a socialist and so he rejected the extreme individualist mode of explanation.) We may ask, then, what social conditions direct individuals to extremism? Wettersten's purpose is not to explain "why specific individuals or groups of individuals choose to adopt extremist positions ... but only [to claim] ... that institutionalized standards of rationality help them along the way to defending, even to institutionalizing, their views when they choose to do so; [and] that institutionalized views of rationality can be changed to improve the practice of rationality; and that such an improvement can remove this means of legitimizing extremist positions." This is very exciting as it is another instance of philosophical considerations claim to improve significantly our ways of thinking and even the quality of our lives.

The trouble is that rationality should but does not as yet help us avoid extremism.

Extremism regarding any item is the idea that only extreme cases of that item are available, or that only they are reasonable to seek. The simplest case of extremes is the idea that the item in question is present or absent, like life and death: when we say that some person is almost dead, whatever we may by that, it is not that the person in question is literally partly dead and partly alive. Indeed, the law of all civilized societies defends the lives of individuals without allowing for the view of them as nearly dead or anything of this kind. Many other things are familiar only in their extreme forms. One prominent example here is the present of things in any point in space-time: in Newtonian physics every point in space-time is either occupied or not. Kant denied this (under the influence of Leibniz) on the ground of some questionable considerations. Field theory nevertheless vindicated him: whereas classical physics took an extremist view of occupation of matter in space, modern physics takes it for granted that no point in space-time is utterly empty. An example that takes us nearer to the present discussion of Wettersten is the idea of Francis Bacon that unless one is utterly free of all preconceived notion (dogma, prejudice, and superstition), one cannot function as a scientific researcher. This is important, if at all, only on the supposition that utter freedom from all preconceived notion is possible. Bertrand Russell called this supposition humbug, thus rendering it possible to grade the level of intellectual freedom that one may reach.

Bacon first promised success for all research: proper research is bound to be successful. He then said, this is so on an obvious condition: before an experiment takes place one should not decide its outcome: one must let facts speak for themselves. This sounds very reasonable, but it turns out to be very hard; our awareness of the difficulty to be intellectually free mounts as long as despite our raising of our efforts to succeed in research we remain frustrated. This is a pattern: first make a fabulous promise, then make it conditioned on a small sacrifice, and then make the size of the sacrifice grow as much as necessary to avoid the conclusion that the promise was broken. The paradigm is not Bacon but the promise for salvation of all religion. The Pauline

promise for salvation is the most prominent: just believe that the Savior came to save you, that the Redeemer came to redeem you of all your sins.

What this shows, says Wettersten, is that rationality alone does not suffice to avoid this kind of trap. It is a special case of the trap that Popper called reinforced dogmatism. Like everyone else, Popper deemed dogmatism irrational. Jarvie and I tried to square rationality with dogmatism ("The Rationality of Dogmatism", in our *Rationality: The Critical View*, 1987). We even tried to square the theory of rationality with irrationalism ("The Rationality of Irrationalism", *ibid.*). Going further, Wettersten claims that likewise rationality needs squaring with the prevalence of extremism even in the very best intellectual circles. This is quite agreeable to us, of course.<sup>1</sup>

Partly, Wettersten finds the fault with some simple confusion, of course. Thus, we regularly confuse the idea that rational action maximizes results — we take the shortest routes to our goals — with the idea of maximum rationality — we always choose the best possible goals and the shortest possible routes (rather than the best we know of, for example). But confusion is only a part of the story. Error is the other part: we assume that going for the highest degree of rationality possible is more rational than going for the highest degree of rationality available. For, it is suggested, going for the impossible strains our muscles most and so brings about the best result available, whereas going for the best result available may make us content with less than with what we can achieve. (This error too, incidentally, may be viewed as confusion of the diverse senses of availability and possibility. But then, confusion clarified usually becomes clear error.) Wettersten also suggests another error: having some of us go for the highest degree of whatever they are doing may benefit us all and at least tell us what is the limit that is at all possible. (A most conspicuous example for the public benefit of extremes is the best achievement in science and in technology; the most conspicuous example for the fixing of the limit is top-level sports.)

Wettersten takes as his paradigm the philosophy of history that is the background of the terrific historical studies of Jacob Talmon. This is a very good choice, since Wettersten considers Talmon's output excellent, since Talmon considered disastrous the extremist rationalism and utopianism of the Enlightenment Movement, since Wettersten agrees with him about that, yet while considering Talmon an extremist too, albeit of a different sort. The excess that Talmon wrongly supports lies in his view of an earthly liberal democracy as insufficient, since there is the need for higher, transcendent values. He finds this excess in accord with the identification of all theories of rationality with the extremist theory of rationality that the Enlightenment Movement had advocated: limiting the variants of a theory to its extremist versions reduces their number drastically. This, says Wettersten, constrains Talmon's view: he can offer no theory of the rationality of liberal democracy.

This failing of Talmon is quite general. As noted above, the classical theory of rationality was limited to successful conduct, and Talmon cannot see liberal democracy but as a failure, since it falls short by his extremist criterion. Nor does Talmon take his own alternative as a theory of rationality, since his alternative is highly socially oriented and the classical theory of rationality, as noted above, disregards social circumstances, as they are often far from rational. Disregarding

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<sup>1</sup> Wettersten also criticizes the sub-title of our book, "The Critical View", that is in the singular and should be in the plural. He is right, of course, although all the possible critical views stand apart from the traditional ones.

historical circumstances leads to utopianism, and Talmon rejects it. So he replaces it with a Hegelian theory of history, says Wettersten, but without a theory of destiny. This, adds Wettersten, deprives it of all explanatory power: by Talmon, the fate of a historical movement is determined not by its goal and not by any rationality, and so it is unexplainable.

This is not easily obvious, since Talmon does explain much. In particular he explains failures as rooted in erroneous (extremist) views. But the failures then lead to further changes ("dialectically"), and these are not explained. For the new ideas to develop and bring about new failures there has to be some rationality to them, and this Talmon ignores in favor of some vague transcendentalism, to repeat.

There still is a need to explain the prevalence of extremism. I have indicated above, the extremist view is the simplest and it clashes with reality rapidly but then the requirement of some small sacrifice to make it true becomes very appealing: we all think that small sacrifices are inevitable except in very extreme cases. Also, this demand seems morally right on diverse views of morality and so it looks a winner. This is a general fact. To take the most prominent example, let me refer to Marxist social thinkers, since Marxism is opposed to moralizing. Marx assumed that the workers will be driven to the revolution because their fight for the improvement of their lots under capitalism must fail since the competitive nature of the system will force capitalists to pay them minimum wages. Marxist social thinkers notice that this is not true. Nothing is more rational than to say that Marx was in error, since the introduction of trade unions limits the competition in the system. Instead they blame workers for their greed.

Blame, to repeat, is popular. It appears in theoretical discussions under a famous extremist ploy: if only. This ploy is already in Bacon's writing: if only people were a little less self-centered and more generous, then science would flourish and all our problems will be solvable. And so, a few simple techniques interlock to block progress. It is particularly hard, Wettersten observes, to demand the lowering of standards. This sounds paradoxical and so it has, he says, little chance of implementation. Perhaps: such things are not given to rational prediction. But then we do not know and we should try. The analysis that Wettersten offers, if it has any merit at all, should make us reasonably more optimistic. And its merit is so obvious that it should lead to serious discussion and efforts at practical improvements.

**Contact details: [agass@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:agass@post.tau.ac.il)**

## References

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