Since the Enlightenment era in the 17th and 18th centuries, Western culture has tended toward applying a "method of reason" to the human experience. The use of reason and only reason in all circumstances is the foundation of Michael Oakeshott's definition of Rationalism. Oakeshott, a British conservative political and philosophical thinker who lived from 1901 to 1990, wrote an essay called "Rationalism in Politics" about the relationship between the "rational" way of thinking and the patterns of prevalent political behavior. According to Oakeshott, Rationalism means the exclusion of tradition from the body of human knowledge. This exclusion continues to haunt American culture today in the ethnocentrism which Rationalism fosters and also in the structure of the United States government.

"Rationalism in politics...involves...a misconception with regard to the nature of human knowledge, which amounts to a corruption of the mind," says Oakeshott. The misconception he is talking about has to do with traditional knowledge. Tradition is passed down, sometimes over

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4. Ibid., 15.
hundreds of years, and it is generally not written down.\textsuperscript{6} Sometimes tradition is of such a nature that it is impossible to write it down or describe it. Rational knowledge, however, can always be written down and reduced to a formal argument.\textsuperscript{7} Rationalism, then, according to Oakeshott, is the belief that rational knowledge is the only knowledge, and that tradition is not knowledge at all.\textsuperscript{8} By excluding tradition from human knowledge and acting only on rational knowledge, Rationalists introduce consequences that have far-reaching effects on cultural behavior.

One consequence of rationalism is that a person must start with a blank slate every time he wants to learn how to do something.\textsuperscript{9} A Rationalist will only accept a practice if it has been logically proven acceptable. Such a mindset unnecessarily demands the expenditure of a great amount of energy when people may already be comfortable doing something a certain way. For example, the wheel has been used for various purposes, including moving things around, for thousands of years. When a new generation started moving things around, they did not stop to think about what method made abstract, logical sense; they used what worked—the wheel. To use popular figurative language, they did not reinvent the wheel. However, just because one accepts tradition as a form of knowledge does not mean that tradition must be followed blindly. There is a middle road between rejecting tradition absolutely and embracing it without question. One must use common sense, a form of knowledge which cannot be taught—like tradition. It is also important to realize that tradition is not static. Tradition is constantly changing and evolving with the culture. The Rationalist might not understand that he is denying the power of common


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 8-9.
sense and cultural knowledge, but it is a serious consequence of rejecting tradition and relying only on logical argument.

**Ethnocentrism in Rationalism**

Ethnocentrism is the act of interpreting and judging other cultures through the lens of one’s own culture or societal norms, and it includes making assumptions about a culture based on one’s own limited experience. The term “ethnocentrism” is used by anthropologists who study culture, which is defined very broadly as the set of learned behaviors that humans share with other members of a society. Anthropologists use “ethnocentrism” to define a phenomenon that compromises the efficacy of their research. Everyone is ethnocentric to a certain extent; one only knows so much of the world, and he inevitably interprets new experiences with reference to old experiences. However, it is possible to limit ethnocentrism, so it is not a necessary evil to be endured, but a barrier to be lowered. Through one of the results of Rationalism, Rationalists embrace ethnocentrism subconsciously in their quest for the reign of pure reason.

A consequence of Rationalism is the generalization of solutions. According to Oakeshott, Rationalists believe that the same solution can be applied to all instances of a problem without regard to circumstance. Because the Rationalist holds that all knowledge must be acquired through logical reasoning, he does not believe that circumstance is important. One must reason from the problem to the solution, without any help from tradition or other “subjective” elements.

10. FOOTNOTE REMOVED BY MBM
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
Reason is an abstract entity, but Rationalists think that it has the final say on concrete problems and that the same problem can and should be solved the same way every time.

The following is one illustration of this consequence: Baby formula is good for babies in the United States, so it must also be good for babies in Africa, right? Actually, breastmilk provides an infant’s immune system all sorts of benefits which formula cannot match.\textsuperscript{14} However, it is the difference in circumstances between American infants and African infants that matters. Nutritious food—and food in general—is more available in the United States than in Africa. Therefore, the babies in Africa need to take advantage of any benefits they can in order to survive.\textsuperscript{15} The problem of convenience is solved by formula in the United States without issue, but in Africa it does not have the same effect.

Believing that one solution will always be the best solution for a problem is ethnocentric. By promoting ethnocentrism, Rationalism encourages prejudice and other forms of bigotry. Rationalists, believing in one right way of doing something and disregarding circumstance, do not tolerate people and ideas different from their own. They expect others to conform to the “only” way of doing things that to them is so obvious. As the U.S. Office of Personnel Management has several webpages on diversity,\textsuperscript{16} one would think that diversity is important to the United States government, which is supposed to be representative of the nation. However, the contemporary United States government is itself a product of Rationalism,\textsuperscript{17} so it is ironic that

\textsuperscript{14} FOOTNOTE REMOVED BY MBM
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} See “Rationalism and the United States Government”
diversity is celebrated even while it is being subconsciously undermined by Rationalism in American culture.

While it is impossible to completely eradicate ethnocentrism in one’s mindset, it is possible to limit the effects of ethnocentrism. The approach by which anthropologists accomplish this is cultural relativism. Cultural relativism (not the same as moral relativism) recognizes that a culture should not be dismissed merely because it is different from the culture to which one is accustomed. Ethnocentrism and Rationalism do not take circumstance into account; they do not recognize that there are good reasons, such as environment, for the differences between cultures. Cultural relativism does. It is an approach that seeks to understand human behavior both from the point of view of the people living the behavior and from a neutral objective perspective. It applies to cultures in the past as well as those in the present. Rationalists are ethnocentric with regard to the past, as they believe that the ideas from the past are obsolete or irrational. However, the Rationalist’s ethnocentrism with regard to the present is worse because it is a component of the generalization of solutions. Just because two cultures have some of the same problems does not necessarily mean that the same solutions will work for both.

Ethnocentrism exists in the United States mainly in the form of nationalism. Of course an American thinks that the U.S. is the best country in the world; it would be unpatriotic not to think so. Americans also have a great deal of pride in the structure of their government, and the nation has fought several wars to defend and promote that structure. The influence of Rationalism is clear; the representative republic is the best form of government, so all nations should have representative republics, regardless of circumstances.

**Rationalism and the United States Government**
One of the greatest examples of the generalization of solutions is the big, strong, central government that exists in the United States. The founding fathers did not plan it that way, but some feared it would happen. It is a credit to the wisdom of the Anti-federalists that so many of their predictions came true, but without the Federalists, would the United States even exist? The Federalists and Anti-Federalists bitterly debated the structure of the new United States government. Both sides wanted a united country that could withstand attack from the outside. Both sides also wanted a government for the people, by the people. The goal was to have a free country where the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was not infringed upon. States were to make as many of their own decisions as possible, and the central government would only need to act on issues affecting the whole. Rationalism in the form of the generalization of solutions undermines the original intent of the founding fathers, yet permeates the U.S. government today.

The Federalists and the Anti-federalists were two political parties in the late 1700s. Their main argument was ostensibly whether or not to ratify the new U.S. Constitution. One of the major issues of their debate was the power of the central government. The Federalists, who supported the Constitution, argued that a strong central government was necessary in order to protect the vulnerable country and impose its power on the states for the purposes of taxation and other necessities. James Madison expresses this argument in Federalist No. 45:

The adversaries to the plan of the convention, instead of considering in the first place what degree of power was absolutely necessary for the purposes of the federal government, have exhausted themselves in a secondary inquiry into the possible consequences of the proposed degree of power to the governments of the particular States. But if the Union, as has been shown, be essential to the security of the people of
America against foreign danger; if it be essential to their security against contentions and wars among the different States; if it be essential to guard them against those violent and oppressive factions which embitter the blessings of liberty, and against those military establishments which must gradually poison its very fountain; if, in a word, the Union be essential to the happiness of the people of America, is it not preposterous, to urge as an objection to a government, without which the objects of the Union cannot be attained, that such a government may derogate from the importance of the governments of the individual States?¹⁹

On the other hand, the Anti-federalists believed that the Constitution went too far, that it would weaken the power of the states and the people, and that it would eventually usurp the states’ rights altogether. The Anti-federalist writer Brutus explicitly predicts just that:

It is true this government is limited to certain objects, or to speak more properly, some small degree of power is still left to the States; but a little attention to the powers vested in the general government, will convince every candid man, that if it is capable of being executed, all that is reserved for the individual States must very soon be annihilated, except so far as they are barely necessary to the organization of the general government.²⁰

In addition, the writer Montezuma decries with biting sarcasm the limits on the House of Representatives, which was to act on behalf of the people. “[We are] impressed with a conviction that this constitution is calculated… to enforce obedience to laws by a strong executive, aided by


military pensioners; and finally to promote the public and private interests of the better kind of people…”

Montezuma concludes. He clearly does not believe that the Constitution will guarantee his freedom. The result of the debate between the Federalists and Anti-federalists was that the Constitution was ratified and a Bill of Rights added. History proved that the central government would indeed grow into the unshakeable bureaucracy the Anti-federalists feared.

Unsurprisingly, as the Constitution was written during the Enlightenment era, Rationalism is at the heart of the debate over central government. A large, strong, central government like that of the United States is simply an institutionalized generalization of solutions. It is the opposite of subsidiarity, where decisions are made at the smallest possible level—federal, state, local, family, individual—and in some cases there may be as many different decisions as there are people. The generalization of solutions and big government go hand in hand.

The New Deal, a solution to the Great Depression for the whole country, needed a slightly bigger government; the government grew. The central government could have maintained its weight if it had allowed Pennsylvania to recover Pennsylvania and Idaho to recover Idaho. The circumstances in Pennsylvania were not the same in Idaho. The interests of Pennsylvania were not the interests of Idaho. There may have been a solution for Pennsylvania and a solution for Idaho. No one will ever know, because the central government took over and applied one solution to 48 unique states.

In some cases, legislation (or executive maneuvering) on a national level does not make sense. A country the size of the United States will always have a huge amount of variation in the

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circumstances of different states, different counties, and different localities. Concrete situational nuances matter. A small detail can make a plan feasible or not feasible, and details vary greatly across even small geographical areas. A strategy that works with one group of people may wreak havoc for another group of people.

The founding fathers did not want problems to be handled at the national level when it was not necessary. They had fought hard for a say in their government, and they knew that the larger the government became, the more diluted individual freedom would also become. That is why the founders established a federal government, where the central government governs the states, and the states govern the people. Today, state laws are almost idiosyncrasies; people are startled when they are reminded that the laws in the states they are visiting might not be the same as those in their home states. Such is the effect of Rationalism in American culture with respect to the government.

The Rationalist generalization of solutions goes against the grain of freedom by not allowing the people the chance to solve their own problems. Again, the New Deal is a good example. The government stepped in to solve the problem of the Great Depression, creating an expectation that the government should solve such problems. It is a great tragedy when the people of a free nation lose their freedom by giving it away. Rationalism encourages just that—people giving their rights to the government so that the government can tell them how to solve their problems.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Rationalism, the exclusion of tradition from the body of human knowledge, haunts American culture today in the shape of the generalization of solutions. Applying the same solution to a problem every time it occurs without considering circumstance
is a form of ethnocentrism, judging and interpreting other cultures in terms of one’s own culture. Ethnocentrism in turn fosters prejudice, bigotry, and an intolerance of differences. The generalization of solutions is also ingrained in American culture through the United States government, which legislates on a large national scale and leaves little governing power to the states and the people. The “corruption of the mind” which Oakeshott identified in Rationalism is deeply entrenched in American culture.


