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ARTICLE

You Can't Argue Against Rationality

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Abstract

Much of Western philosophy has treated the ability to reason as both the defining feature of human nature and also the condition of knowledge. Even when philosophers attempt to expose reason's finitude, the very form of argument simply bolsters the authority it seeks to constrain. Philosophy cannot fully displace rationality when it presupposes rigid standards of justification. But literature works differently: because it does not need to defend itself through argument, it can effectively reveal the limits of rationality. By examining the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Foucault, Nietzsche, and Cavell together with the literary works Goethe's *Faust* and Shelley's *Frankenstein*, this article argues that literary work critiques rationality in ways philosophical discourse cannot.

Keywords: Cavell; genre; literature; rational philosophy

Western philosophy often treats reason—or rationality—as defining what is unique about humans.[1] This tendency has sparked a debate about the reliability of our ability to reason. Yet even when philosophers reject rationality, they use reason to do so, reinforcing the centrality of what they reject. This is why literature, a mode of representation rather than a form of argument, critiques rationality more successfully than philosophy can.

1.

Plato ranks reason as the ruling element of the soul. In the *Phaedo*, he claims the body deceives, and that we can only access truth when the soul unburdens itself from sensory distractions.[2] "Aspiring after true being" happens when the mind leaves the body, and "has as little as possible to do with [it], and has no bodily sense or feeling."[3] In the *Republic*, the just life is one in which reason governs appetite and passion.[4] Plato centers rationality in our lives as both epistemically privileged and normatively supreme: it grants access to truth and defines what it means to flourish as a human being.

[1] For my argument, I will use rationality and reason somewhat interchangeably.
[2] On interpreting the *Phaedo*, see Annas 2003.
[3] Plato 2009, 27.
[4] Plato 1987, 2013; see Annas 1981.

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Aristotle, Plato's student, further articulates rationality as unique to mankind, arguing in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the function of the human being is rational activity: that is, living and acting in accordance with reason.[5] "For man," he states, "the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else *is* man. This life therefore is also the happiest". Happiness (eudemonia), in his view, is not a feeling but the ultimate goal for mankind: a sustained mode of excellent rational living.[6]

Two thousand years later, French philosopher René Descartes locates rational reflection as *the* condition of certainty: rationality becomes the essential foundation for *any* knowledge.[7] In the *Meditations*, radical doubt strips away all the uncertainty until one truth remains: the thinking self. He identifies the essence (*res cogitans*) of the human being as a "thinking thing" who doubts, comprehends, imagines, and wills—to name only a few functions of reason.[8] With the *cogito*, Descartes binds our very existence to rationality; the place from which all knowledge must be grounded. The senses are unreliable unless validated by reason, and the "mind alone, and not mind and body in conjunction," is necessary "to a knowledge of the truth."[9]

Although Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes recognize its finitude, their philosophies place rationality at the center of human nature: we are defined by the capacity to reason, and only through rationality can the highest or most certain truths can be known.[10]

2.

In contrast, David Hume rejects reason as the primary source of our knowledge. He criticizes "abstruse philosophy" (a direct dig at Plato) detached from ordinary life and denies that causal inference can be rationally justified.[11] Our belief that the future will resemble the past does not arise from reasoning but from "custom": a psychological habit formed from repeat experience.[12] Even once we come to experience and understand "the operations of cause and effect," Hume claims, "our conclusions from that experience are not founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding."[13] Reason is limited and subordinate to our experience informed by our senses.[14] In this way, Hume attempts to knock rationality off from its privileged epistemic position and restore philosophy to lived experience.[15]

Kant moves in the opposite direction. He argues that morality depends on reason's ability to legislate universally. The Categorical Imperative expresses this requirement: we must act

[5] Aristotle 2009 (1097b); see Terrence Irwin's commentary in Aristotle 2019 (1178a2-5).
[6] See Nagel 1972 (1179a).
[7] On the ways Descartes influenced not only philosophy but also the field of science, see Williams 2005.
[8] Descartes 1996, 18.
[9] Descartes 1996, 29.
[10] Many contemporary philosophers have moved the field beyond the standards of justification inherited from Plato and Aristotle and the limits of Cartesian dualism. For work on the former, see Craig 2002; Kvanvig 2003. For the latter, see Fricker 2007; Haraway 1991; Srinivasan 2015. These authors' works further exemplify the influence Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes have had—and still hold—on Western philosophy.
[11] Hume 2007, 4.
[12] Hume 2007, 32.
[13] Hume 2007, 23.
[14] Hume 2007, 47.
[15] See Owen 1999.

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only on maxims that could be rationally adopted by all.[16] Unlike Hume, Kant elevates reason above experience; a good will must not be determined by desire or impulses, but only by reason.[17] "The true vocation of reason," he claims, "must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps *as a means* to other purposes, but *good in itself*, for which reason was absolutely necessary."[18] Still, he acknowledges reason's limits: we cannot comprehend the metaphysical ground of freedom, though morality presupposes it (we must freely *choose* to use reason). In this sense, reason both establishes moral law and also recognizes the limits of its own reach.[19]

Despite their differences, Hume and Kant share a structural feature: in both cases, reason remains the medium and measure of critique. Hume critiques privileged rationality through philosophical argument, whereas Kant reforms rationalism by granting reason authority to legislate morality and define its own bound. For these thinkers, even when reason is declared limited, it appears sovereign in setting those limits, and neither escapes the authority of rationality.

3.

Even genealogies on rationality cannot break free. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault traces how different historical configurations determine what counts as knowledge and what appears intelligible. He seeks to unsettle rational authority by revealing its contingency, yet he cannot sidestep the medium it means to expose. Rationality, for Foucault, is not timeless or universal but historically constituted. The "Western *ratio*" arises from specific epistemic shifts—most notably with Descartes—where knowledge becomes ordered.[20] Scientific rationalization is not the discovery of truth but the product of a particular mode of thought that shapes our relationship to and perception of the world.[21] Rationality becomes institutionalized. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that knowledge and rational discourse are inseparable from disciplinary mechanisms. Even when presented as neutral or universal, reason implicitly maintains power structures.[22]

Although Foucault disavows normativity, genealogy already implies critique. The very demonstration of contingency depends on normative reasoning. In revealing rationality as historically bounded, Foucault exercises a form of rational authority: he orders archives, reconstructs epistemological ages, and renders intelligible transformations of thought. He conducts his analysis of rational authority in the language it seeks to destabilize.[23]

Foucault gestures toward another mode of critique: literature. Literary "experience," for him, suspends theoretical frameworks and conceptions of the self to expose the limits of language and thought without re-grounding in justification.[24] If genealogy reveals the contingency of rationality, literary form stages the experience of that contingency. And

[16] Kant 1998, 31.
[17] Kant 1998, 57.
[18] Kant 1998, 48.
[19] See Allison 1990.
[20] Foucault 1970, 411.
[21] Foucault 1970, 393.
[22] Foucault 1977.
[23] For a discussion on imagination and finitude, as well as a critique of how Foucault is not simply descriptive, see Han 2002.
[24] Foucault 1970, 419; For a reading on Foucault's concept of experience, see Lemke 2011.

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so, Foucault's project confronts a structural difficulty: philosophy can diagnose the limits of reason, but so long as it proceeds by argument, it cannot fully displace rational authority.

4.

Avoiding this trap, Friedrich Nietzsche critiques rationality not merely in content but in form, exemplifying a broader shift in postrationalist philosophy.[25] Nietzsche argues that philosophers elevate "truth" as a defense against uncertainty, imposing order as a salve to the instability of lived experience. Against this inheritance—from Plato to Kant—Nietzsche calls for a "new species of philosopher," one willing to embrace the "dangerous Perhaps": life without metaphysical or moral certainty.[26] He answers his own philosophical call through a performative style that critiques rationality without reinserting the truth-ideals he rejects.[27]

Nietzsche challenges the view that truth is superior to "appearance."[28] Appearance does not denote illusion but names perspective. Interpretation, for him, constitutes the only reality available to us, there being no access to the world without it. Art, therefore, exemplifies reality itself, an expression of life grounded in perspective. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche enacts this conviction. Favoring parable and dialogue, the narrator declares: "Not only the rationality of millenniums—also their madness, breaketh out in us. Dangerous is it to be an heir."[29] Rather than argue against rationalism through analysis, Nietzsche unsettles the reader through form, precisely in the way he thinks we should feel shirking off our philosophical legacy. Aphorisms and irony replace deductive closure, and argumentative reassurance is absent.[30]

Recognizing that style is not ornamental, Nietzsche's writing does not simply convey a thesis about rationality; it stages a confrontation with inherited modes of thought. In so doing, his work compels readers to engage affectively and interpretatively—an understanding separate from rational analysis. Form becomes a medium that displaces rational supremacy.

5.

Philosophy must justify its claims, but literature *just is.* This allows literature to represent the pitfalls of rationality without reentering the justificatory economy that sustains rational authority. For instance, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are literary warnings against the supremacy of reason.[31] Instead of applying rational explanations, these works navigate through ambiguity, memory, and embodiment.[32]

[25] It may be odd for the reader to see Nietzsche after Foucault, breaking chronological order. I'm placing them this way because I'm not concerned with Nietzsche's influence on Foucault in this paper, but rather with Nietzsche as paradigmatic in terms of his style—something that Foucault did not adopt.

[26] Nietzsche 2008, 7.

[27] For a discussion on Nietzsche's style, see Clark and Dudrick 2012.

[28] Nietzsche 2008, 38.

[29] Nietzsche 1961, 81.

[30] See Strauss 2020, in particular, for the idea that Nietzsche not only creates counter-dialogues in response to Plato but also that he should be read with a literary lens.

[31] I've chosen these works specifically because of their enduring cultural influence. Both the London Royal Opera House's 2025 staging of Gounod's *Faust* and Guillermo Del Toro's 2025 film take on *Frankenstein* are testament to the longevity of these figures.

[32] The topic of 18th-century and Romantic interest in affect as an antidote to reason lies beyond the scope of this paper. I'm interested in the broader implications of literary works that critique rationality.

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In *Faust*, Goethe dramatizes the exhaustion of intellectual mastery. Faust has devoted himself to philosophy, science, and theology, only to discover that such knowledge has not yielded wisdom or meaning:

> FAUST: All that philosophy can teach,
> The craft of lawyer and of leech,
> I've mastered, ah! and sweated through
> Theology's dreary deserts, too,
> Yet here, poor fool! for all my lore,
> I stand no wiser than before.[33]

His rational mastery reveals itself to be hollow: it cannot provide transcendence. The turn to the divine—and later to the overtly sensual—reveals his refusal to accept human finitude. Goethe's theatrical take on Faust embodies the dangers of over-rationalization, preventing rational authority from appearing self-sufficient and disembodied.[34] Faust's destruction is an existential, staged collapse—not a logical contraption.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* portrays a similar pattern within an emerging world of scientific discourse. Victor Frankenstein seeks to "learn the hidden laws of nature" and to exercise control over life itself.[35] Yet, his scientific ambition stays divorced from community and ethical responsibility. The creature Frankenstein creates is a manifestation of his rational overreach. Shelley does not deny the value of inquiry but condemns unrestrained scientific ambition driven by a fantasy of total mastery.[36] Like Goethe, she does so narratively. The reader inhabits Frankenstein's perspective: we become witness to his ambition and its consequences. Shelley demonstrates the limits of reason not through philosophical refutation but through the unfolding of experience.

Literature escapes the shackles of reason. Philosophy challenges rationality through argument, but argument presupposes standards of justification and coherence. Staying within these bounds only reaffirms reason's authority as the medium of justification. Literature, on the other hand, does not claim epistemic supremacy or theses in need of defense. In *Faust* and *Frankenstein*, we experience rationality's limits rather than being instructed about them. Because literature does not compete within an economy of reasons, it can expose the limits of rationality without reinstating its authority through argument.[37]

Moreover, the philosophical genre is self-serving as philosophers go to rationality to find meaning or sense through their medium. They often treat rational analysis as the privileged route to sense-making in which rationality preserves its authority by declaring its own limits. When reason presents itself as modest and self-correcting, it only strengthens its dominance. By contrast, through literature, we can feel and inhabit from within the portrayal without securing knowledge of characters or events.[38]

[33] Goethe 2008, 25.

[34] Thanks to Prof. Jeffrey Wilson for highlighting the differences in Goethe's rendition of *Faust.*

[35] Shelley 1996, 20.

[36] See Mellor 2012.

[37] Klassen (2022) takes arguments against rationality seriously but ultimately argues that literature is a domain where rationality becomes revealed as broader than narrow conceptions of it and, in this way, essential to human flourishing.

[38] On worldmaking in literature, see Nabokov 1983. Also, see Auyoung 2018.

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6.

When Nietzsche turns to literary form to resist rationalism, Stanley Cavell turns to literary criticism. Cavell's critique of rationality, therefore, becomes a critique of genre: philosophy seeks assurance, whereas literature exposes the limits of that demand. This reframes Plato.

In "The Avoidance of Love," Cavell argues that modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes, redefines knowledge as certainty: to know the world is to render it fully present to consciousness.[39] Once knowledge is equated with epistemic assurance, skepticism becomes inevitable.[40] That is, the more philosophy demands certainty, the more the world seems to recede. Cavell does not attempt to refute skepticism but rejects the demand that produces it. Our relation to the world, he argues, must ground in *acknowledgment*: a responsiveness that accepts uncertainty rather than overcoming it. Literature stages this vulnerability, placing us within scenes of relation.[41] In this sense, literature does not solve skepticism; it shows us how to live with it.[42]

If literature exposes the limits of rationality more effectively than philosophy, Plato appears like a counterexample: the philosopher who elevates reason writes in a literary genre.[43] In the dialogues, Plato does not present reason from an impersonal viewpoint; argument unfolds where the reader and the characters coexist, where inquiry is a shared endeavor. Rational authority comes not as detached certainty but enacted within conversation, vulnerable to misunderstanding and incompletion.

And so, a paradox exists. Plato's conclusions tether humanity to reason, but his own medium prevents reason from appearing self-grounding.[44] Later philosophy keeps the argument and abandons the dramatic form. What survives is rational authority without the genre that once exposed its limits. The question, then, is not whether reason can criticize itself, but whether the genres through which it speaks allow its limits to become visible. Cavell's acknowledgment helps clarify what Plato's dialogue performs: our relation to the world is not grounded in epistemic certainty. When we grant reason a monopoly over intelligibility, we define selfhood exclusively through analytical argument, and our understanding of ourselves withers.

Claire Watts works on philosophy and literary criticism, focusing on moral psychology and the limits of rational justification. She begins graduate study in philosophy this fall.

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[39] Cavell 2015, 297.
[40] Cavell 2015, 297.
[41] Cavell 2015, 310.
[42] See "Plato" in Landy 2012.
[43] On Platonic philosophy as inseparable from the genre of drama, see Rosen 2008.
[44] In an adjacent account, Landy argues that point of Plato's dialogues is not to showcase logical consistence but to exemplify how to learn well and flourish.

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