

ESSAY II

The Authority of Reason

Discovery, Construction, and the Limits of Rational Jurisdiction

METHOD: Dialectical reconstruction and institutional critique

CONTRIBUTION: Synthetic normative-institutional model

CENTRAL CLAIM

Reason possesses authority only within domains where its premises, methods, exclusions, and consequences remain open to relevant evidence, reciprocal challenge, and correction.

ABSTRACT

Reason can discover constraints that preference cannot repeal, yet it operates through concepts, languages, instruments, and institutions that human beings construct. This essay rejects both a view from nowhere and unrestricted constructivism. It distinguishes logical validity, epistemic authority, procedural fairness, democratic legitimacy, and moral permission, showing that achievement in one register does not automatically confer authority in another. The earned-jurisdiction model evaluates rational practices by disclosure, relevance, reciprocity, domain competence, error distribution, and capacity for correction. The model is applied to law, expertise, algorithms, and credit decisions. Reason is defended as indispensable but denied automatic sovereignty.

Keywords: reason; rationality; jurisdiction; public reason; social epistemology; procedure; legitimacy; algorithms

Opening Problem

Human beings rarely appeal to reason modestly. A manager announces that layoffs are “the rational decision.” A court calls a rule “reasonable.” A model ranks applicants according to “objective risk.” In each case, the word does more than describe a method. It asks for obedience.

The central dispute is not whether reasoning occurs. It is what kind of authority rationality may claim. One tradition imagines reason as discovery: the world has an intelligible order, and disciplined thought apprehends it. Another emphasizes construction: the categories by which objects become knowable are shaped by cognition, language, history, and institution. The first position risks presenting inherited categories as reality itself. The second risks making correction impossible if every account is only one construction among others.

The argument developed here is dialectical. Reason discovers constraints that human preference cannot simply repeal, but it does so through conceptual and institutional forms that human beings construct. The proper question is therefore not “discovery or construction?” in the abstract. It is whether a particular rational practice has earned jurisdiction over the matter it proposes to govern.

Jurisdiction is earned when the practice can show its premises, explain its method, register relevant evidence, expose its distribution of error, and provide a route of correction. A calculation may be valid and still be based on an unjust category. A procedure may be consistent and still exclude the people whose lives supply its data. Rationality becomes authoritative not by escaping history but by building institutions of self-correction within it.

Earned Jurisdiction

The earned-jurisdiction model treats reason neither as an innate monarch nor as a rhetorical costume. Its authority is domain-specific and performance-based. Mathematical proof earns a kind of authority through demonstrable validity. Experimental science earns another through reproducible method, predictive success, and organized correction. Public reason earns authority only where citizens can understand the grounds of coercive decisions and contest the categories applied to them.

Four tests determine whether rational authority has been earned. First is disclosure: the premises and inferential steps must be available for inspection. Second is relevance: the evidence must bear upon the actual question rather than a convenient substitute. Third is reciprocity: those subject to the decision must be able to raise objections that the procedure is capable of hearing. Fourth is correction: error must produce revision rather than institutional self-protection.

This account explains how reason can be both constructed and binding. The rules of a fair hearing are human constructions, but once adopted they impose real constraints. A measurement scale is constructed, but it may disclose stable relations. A legal category is constructed, but it can still be criticized for inconsistency, exclusion, or harm. Construction does not abolish truth; it identifies the instruments through which access to truth is

organized.

Position in the Literature

The earned-jurisdiction model stands near several established accounts. Kant's critical philosophy limits reason by distinguishing legitimate cognition from speculative excess (Kant 1998). Rawlsian public reason asks which reasons may justify coercive political power among free and equal citizens (Rawls 1993). Habermasian discourse theory locates rational legitimacy in procedures of communication where validity claims remain open to challenge (Habermas 1984-1987; Habermas 1996). Forst develops a basic right to justification against arbitrary domination (Forst 2012). Social epistemologists and feminist philosophers of science show that objectivity depends upon communities, criticism, institutional diversity, and the inclusion of standpoints capable of exposing shared blind spots (Longino 1990; Harding 1991; Haraway 1988).

Earned jurisdiction is closest to a synthesis of these approaches. It is not a new theory of logic, a complete theory of democratic legitimacy, or a substitute for discourse ethics. Its specific claim is diagnostic: rational authority is domain-specific, and success in one register cannot be transferred without argument into another. Logical validity establishes a relation between premises and conclusion. Epistemic authority concerns whether the premises and methods track truth. Procedural fairness concerns how a decision is reached. Democratic legitimacy concerns the standing of those governed. Moral permission concerns whether the resulting act is justified. A model can be valid but false, accurate but coercive, procedurally fair but morally wrong, democratically authorized but epistemically mistaken, or benevolent in aim while institutionally unaccountable.

The contribution is therefore synthetic and institutional. The model adds a common audit for transfers of authority: what domain has been demonstrated, what additional authority is being claimed, and what new burden must be met? It is defeated if these distinctions add no explanatory value beyond existing accounts, or if the proposed tests merely restate general ideals without changing judgment in hard cases. The algorithmic credit case is used to show the difference. Predictive performance can support epistemic authority concerning default risk, but it does not by itself establish the normative legitimacy of the proxy, the fairness of the distribution, the democratic acceptability of the rule, or the institution's right to deny appeal.

Five Registers of Rational Authority

Reason is frequently invoked as though one successful operation licenses every conclusion that follows. The revision separates five registers. Logical validity concerns whether a conclusion follows from premises. Epistemic authority concerns whether the premises, evidence, and method justify belief. Procedural fairness concerns whether a decision was reached under rules that give relevant parties notice, standing, and a genuine opportunity to respond. Democratic legitimacy concerns whether coercive public decisions are authorized

under institutions that recognize citizens as political equals. Moral permission concerns whether the act itself is justified in light of rights, agency, harm, dependency, and proportion.

These registers can align, but they do not entail one another. A valid syllogism can begin from false premises. An accurate risk model can be applied through an unfair process. A procedurally fair hearing can produce a factually mistaken result. A democratically enacted law can violate rights. A benevolent policy can be imposed through unaccountable administration. The practical value of the earned-jurisdiction model lies in preventing transfer without warrant. Before a conclusion governs, the institution must identify which register has been established and which additional authority it is attempting to claim.

The distinction also clarifies the role of reciprocity. Reciprocity is central to procedural and democratic legitimacy, but it does not determine empirical truth. A vote cannot make a contaminated sample safe. Conversely, technical expertise can establish a fact without settling who may bear the resulting cost. Rational order requires coordination among registers rather than the sovereignty of any one.

Institutional Application: Explainable Adverse Action

Credit underwriting makes the transfer problem visible. A model may identify statistical relationships that improve prediction. That performance supports a limited epistemic claim: under specified data and conditions, the model predicts default with a given error distribution. It does not establish that every variable is normatively appropriate, that historical data are free of discrimination, or that an applicant may be denied without explanation.

In 2022 and 2023, the U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau emphasized that creditors using complex algorithms remained obligated under the Equal Credit Opportunity Act and Regulation B to provide specific and accurate reasons for adverse action. Those circulars were withdrawn in May 2025, but Regulation B continues to require disclosure of specific principal reasons that accurately describe the factors actually considered or scored (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau 2022; 2023; 2025; 12 C.F.R. § 1002.9). This requirement embodies earned jurisdiction. The institution must be able to translate computation into reasons relevant to the person governed by the decision.

A parallel problem appears in facial recognition. NIST testing has documented substantial variation across algorithms and demographic groups, particularly in false-match and false-nonmatch rates (Grother, Ngan, and Hanaoka 2019). The appropriate conclusion is not that every system is unusable or that statistical performance automatically decides policy. The evidence establishes a technical distribution of error. Moral and institutional judgment must then determine whether the use is necessary, whether affected persons receive notice and appeal, and who bears the cost when error is concentrated rather than random.

Reason as Discovery

The Meaning of Reason

The term reason refers to several related but distinct capacities. It may refer to the ability to draw inferences, identify contradictions, distinguish stronger from weaker evidence, formulate concepts, construct explanations, compare alternatives, evaluate consequences, and justify beliefs. It may also refer to a broader ideal of intellectual order: the demand that judgments be coherent, defensible, and open to examination. These meanings should not be collapsed. A person can reason instrumentally without reasoning well about ends. An administrator may calculate the most efficient method of implementing an unjust policy. A corporation may rationally maximize profit under a destructive incentive structure. A military system may optimize violence. Instrumental rationality determines how to achieve a given objective. It does not determine whether the objective deserves pursuit. Reason may therefore be divided into several forms. Theoretical reason

Theoretical reason concerns what is true. It evaluates evidence, inference, explanation, possibility, necessity, and contradiction. Practical reason Practical reason concerns what should be done. It evaluates action, obligation, ends, means, consequences, and principles. Instrumental reason Instrumental reason calculates effective means to previously selected ends. Critical reason Critical reason examines the legitimacy of the ends, categories, institutions, and assumptions that organize judgment. Public reason Public reason concerns the reasons that may be offered to others as justification for laws, policies, or shared institutions. These forms overlap but are not identical. A technically efficient action can be morally irrational. A logically valid argument can begin from false premises. A politically popular policy can lack defensible justification. A personally meaningful belief can remain evidentially unsupported. Reason is not one operation. It is an architecture of judgment.

Rationalism: Truth Through the Structure of Thought

Modern rationalism intensifies the claim that reason can discover necessary truths independently of particular sensory experiences. Descartes seeks certainty by placing inherited beliefs under systematic doubt. Sensory experience can deceive. Memory can fail. Established authority can be mistaken. The philosophical task is to identify a foundation that cannot be doubted without being affirmed through the act of doubting. The Cartesian *cogito* - the recognition that thinking confirms the existence of the thinker attempts to establish such a foundation. From this point, Descartes seeks to reconstruct knowledge through clear and distinct ideas, rational demonstration, and metaphysical guarantees. Spinoza develops a more systematic rationalism. Reality is treated as an intelligible whole governed by necessity. Human freedom does not consist in escaping causation but in understanding the causes that determine thought and action. To know adequately is to perceive how finite things follow from the structure of substance. Leibniz likewise treats reality as governed by rational principles. Nothing occurs without sufficient reason. Necessary truths can be known through analysis, while contingent truths depend upon the structure of the actual world. Rationalism contributes several enduring insights. First, experience alone cannot explain all knowledge. Logical validity, mathematical necessity, and conceptual relations appear to exceed the accumulation of sensory impressions. Second, rationalism insists that beliefs require more than psychological confidence. They require justification. Third, it recognizes

that knowledge depends upon structures of thought. To know is not merely to receive impressions. It is to organize, distinguish, infer, and explain. The weakness of rationalism appears when the necessity of a conceptual system is mistaken for the necessity of reality itself. A system may be internally rigorous yet externally false. Once premises are granted, conclusions may follow perfectly. The unresolved question is whether the premises deserve admission. Reason cannot generate truth merely by arranging its own concepts. A palace built from flawless geometry may still stand on imaginary ground (Descartes 1996).

Empiricism: The Discipline of Experience

Empiricism challenges the authority of reason when reason attempts to exceed experience. Locke rejects the doctrine that the mind begins with fully formed innate ideas. Knowledge develops through sensation and reflection. The mind works upon materials provided by experience. Berkeley radicalizes the relationship between perception and existence, while Hume subjects central rationalist assumptions to severe criticism. Causation, substance, selfhood, and necessary connection cannot simply be observed. Human beings perceive sequences, regularities, impressions, and associations. The mind then develops expectations and habits. Hume's analysis creates a profound problem for rational authority. Human beings assume that the future will resemble the past, yet this assumption cannot be justified deductively. Any attempt to justify induction by past success already presupposes induction. Reason appears unable to validate one of the basic practices upon which empirical knowledge depends. Empiricism performs an essential correction. It forces rational systems to answer to observation. It denies that conceptual elegance can substitute for evidence. It reveals how easily metaphysics can exceed what human beings are entitled to claim. Yet empiricism also encounters limits. Experience is never received without organization. To identify an event as the same kind of event as another already requires concepts. To observe a cause, object, person, number, or social structure requires a framework through which perception becomes intelligible. Raw sensation does not arrive already labeled. Reason cannot float free of experience, but experience cannot become knowledge without rational form (Hume 2000a).

Reason as Condition and History

Kant: Reason as Constitutive and Limited

Kant transforms the conflict between rationalism and empiricism by arguing that knowledge arises from the cooperation of sensibility and understanding. Experience supplies content. The mind supplies forms. Human beings do not know reality from a standpoint outside their own cognitive conditions. They know objects as those objects appear within the structures through which experience is possible. Space and time are not simply discovered as independent objects. They are forms under which sensory experience is organized. Categories such as causality, substance, unity, and plurality structure the intelligible world. This produces one of the decisive turns in philosophy. Reason does not merely discover an already articulated world. It participates in articulating the world as knowable. Yet Kant

does not conclude that knowledge is

arbitrary. The structures of cognition are not private inventions selected by individuals. They are conditions under which coherent experience becomes possible. Objectivity is preserved because human cognition operates through shared and necessary forms. The distinction between phenomena and noumena marks a limit. Human beings know appearances as structured by the conditions of experience. They do not possess theoretical knowledge of things as they may exist independently of those conditions. Reason therefore has authority, but not unlimited jurisdiction. When reason attempts to establish metaphysical knowledge beyond possible experience, it generates contradiction. Questions concerning the world as a totality, the immortality of the soul, or the existence of God exceed the secure reach of theoretical reason. Kant's critical philosophy is not an attack on reason. It is reason establishing its own boundary. This is a crucial principle: A faculty becomes trustworthy not when it claims unlimited power, but when it identifies the conditions under which its claims remain valid. Reason without boundary becomes dogma. Reason with boundary becomes critique (Kant 1998).

Reason and the Construction of the Object

Modern and contemporary philosophy increasingly recognizes that objects of knowledge are not simply found in finished form. Scientific objects are constructed through measurement systems, classifications, instruments, models, laboratories, and theoretical languages. This qualification does not imply that they are fictional. It means that reality becomes scientifically knowable through organized practices. A disease category is not merely waiting in nature with a label attached. Symptoms, biological markers, patient histories, statistical patterns, diagnostic criteria, and institutional judgments are assembled into a category. The category may track a real condition, but its boundaries are conceptually and institutionally constructed. The same applies to social categories. Crime is not identical with harm. It is conduct classified by law. Citizenship is not a biological property. It is a political status. Property is not merely physical possession. It is a legal relation recognized and enforced by institutions. Intelligence is not one unmediated quantity. It is operationalized through contested measurements. Economic productivity depends upon decisions about which activities count as valuable output. Reason participates in creating the objects it studies by defining units, boundaries, variables, and standards. Construction does not imply fabrication. A map is constructed, but it is constrained by terrain. A scientific model is constructed, but it is constrained by prediction and observation. A legal category is constructed, but it produces real consequences in bodies, institutions, and material distributions. The critical issue is not whether categories are constructed. All articulated categories are constructed in some sense. The issue is whether the construction is adequate, transparent, revisable, and justified.

Language, Experience, and Practice

Language and the Limits of Pure Rationality

Reason does not operate in silence. It operates through language, symbols, formal systems, diagrams, models, and shared practices. This fact complicates claims of pure rationality. Language does not merely express already completed thoughts. It shapes what can be distinguished, related, questioned, and defended. Terms carry inherited contrasts. A concept becomes intelligible through its place within a network of other concepts. The linguistic turn in philosophy challenges the idea that the mind first apprehends reality privately and then attaches words to its discoveries. Meaning often depends upon public use. Wittgenstein's later philosophy emphasizes that words acquire meaning within language games and forms of life. To understand a concept is to understand the practices governing its use. The meaning of "promise," "law," "pain," "ownership," or "evidence" cannot be separated from the social contexts in which these terms operate. This qualification does not imply that truth is merely linguistic convention. A community can use language consistently and still be wrong about reality. Yet there is no conceptually unmediated standpoint from which human beings can describe truth without language. Language is both instrument and limit. It makes reason possible. It also carries inherited errors into every argument. The philosophical task is not to escape language completely. That is impossible. The task is to make linguistic architecture visible enough to examine (Wittgenstein 1953).

Pragmatism: Truth, Inquiry, and Consequence

Pragmatism rejects the image of knowledge as a static correspondence between isolated thought and independent reality. Peirce treats inquiry as a communal and self-corrective process. Beliefs guide action. Doubt disrupts established habits. Inquiry seeks beliefs capable of surviving sustained investigation. William James emphasizes the practical consequences of ideas, though his position should not be reduced to the crude claim that whatever is useful is true. Pragmatist truth concerns how beliefs operate within experience, inquiry, prediction, and life. Dewey treats knowledge as a tool for resolving problems within an environment. Reason is not detached contemplation. It is an adaptive, experimental practice. Pragmatism contributes an important standard: A rational claim must prove capable of functioning within inquiry. This qualification does not imply that truth is whatever produces immediate satisfaction. False beliefs can be comforting and temporarily useful. It means that the significance of a concept is inseparable from the differences it makes in investigation and conduct. A theory that cannot alter prediction, interpretation, decision, or explanation may be verbally elaborate but operationally empty. Pragmatism also relocates rational authority from the isolated genius to the ongoing community of

inquiry. No individual is exempt from correction. Knowledge develops through criticism, experimentation, and revision. Reason becomes trustworthy when it remains corrigible (Peirce 1992-1998; James 1907; Dewey 1922).

The Suspicion of Reason

Critical Theory: When Reason Becomes Domination

Critical theory examines how reason can become distorted by economic systems, bureaucratic institutions, mass culture, and political domination. The Enlightenment promised emancipation through reason. Superstition would be overcome. Arbitrary authority would be exposed. Nature would become intelligible. Human beings would become capable of self-government. Yet rationalization also produced administrative systems capable of organizing exploitation, surveillance, warfare, and mass destruction with unprecedented efficiency. The failure does not lie simply in that reason failed to operate. The problem is that one form of reason operated too successfully. Instrumental reason treats everything as a means: labor, nature, time, attention, bodies, data, and institutions. It asks how to control, predict, optimize, and extract. It does not ask whether the system's ends are legitimate. A rationalized institution may become more efficient while becoming less humane. A workplace may increase productivity while degrading workers. A surveillance system may improve prediction while destroying privacy. A prison may become administratively organized while remaining unjust. An algorithm may distribute decisions consistently while reproducing structural bias. Critical theory therefore distinguishes rationalization from emancipation. Not every increase in calculation is an increase in reason. Habermas attempts to recover a non-dominating form of rationality through communication. Rational authority emerges when claims can be defended in discourse under conditions where participants may question assertions, norms, sincerity, and meaning. The ideal is not that every conflict will reach agreement. It is that no claim should govern solely because one party possesses greater force. Reason is legitimate when it replaces coercion with justification (Habermas 1984-1987).

Reason, Emotion, and the False Division of the Human Mind

Reason is often contrasted with emotion as though the two were independent forces. This division is philosophically crude. Emotions can distort judgment. Fear exaggerates danger. Anger narrows interpretation. Desire selects convenient evidence. Shame encourages concealment. Group loyalty produces asymmetrical standards. Yet emotion also supplies information and value. Compassion reveals suffering as morally significant. Anger can disclose violation. Grief reveals attachment. Fear can identify danger. Disgust may protect against contamination, though it can also become a mechanism of exclusion. Love can reveal value, though it can also produce partiality and possession. A purely emotionless agent would not necessarily be more rational. Without concern, preference, or valuation, there would be no reason to select one end over another. Practical judgment requires some account of what matters. The proper distinction is not between reason and emotion. It is between disciplined and undisciplined judgment. Emotion must not be granted absolute authority merely because it is intense. Reason must not be granted absolute authority merely because it is cold. Coldness can conceal fear. Calculation can conceal cruelty. Detachment can conceal interest. The rational agent does not destroy emotion. The agent interprets it, tests it, and determines whether it should govern. Emotion may testify. It does not automatically receive judgment.

Social Epistemology: Reason Is Not Solitary

The traditional image of reason often centers on the isolated thinker. A mind examines propositions, evaluates evidence, and arrives at judgment. Actual knowledge is more social. Individuals depend upon testimony, institutions, archives, instruments, educational systems, professional expertise, peer review, translation, data collection, and inherited methods. No person independently verifies more than a fraction of what they rationally believe. This dependency does not make knowledge irrational. It makes trust an epistemic problem. Whose testimony deserves credibility? How should expertise be evaluated? What institutional procedures reduce error? How do prejudice and status influence whose knowledge is heard? What happens when entire institutions share the same assumptions? Social epistemology examines how rationality is distributed across communities. An individual may reason carefully from corrupted information. An institution may aggregate knowledge effectively while no single member understands the whole system. A marginalized witness may possess accurate knowledge that dominant institutions refuse to recognize. Reason therefore requires social conditions. Freedom of criticism, access to information, methodological transparency, institutional diversity, protection from retaliation, and the ability to challenge authority are not merely political values. They are epistemic conditions. A society that punishes dissent damages its own capacity to know. A system that allows only authorized conclusions does not possess reason. It possesses doctrine.

Applications and Boundary Cases

Does Reason Discover Moral Truth?

The problem becomes especially difficult in ethics. If moral truths exist independently of human judgment, reason may be capable of discovering them. Moral realism holds that some moral claims are true regardless of personal preference or social approval. Cruelty, exploitation, betrayal, and unjust domination may be wrong even when a society accepts them. This position preserves the possibility of condemning entire cultures or institutions. Yet moral knowledge is harder to establish than empirical fact. Moral properties are not observed in the same manner as mass, temperature, or motion. Ethical disagreement is persistent. Intuitions vary. Principles conflict. Constructivist approaches argue that moral norms arise through rational procedures, conditions of reciprocity, practical agency, or justified agreement. Moral authority does not descend from an independent metaphysical order. It emerges from what persons could rationally endorse under appropriate conditions. Kantian ethics grounds obligation in rational agency. A person should act only according to principles that can be universalized without contradiction. Persons must be treated as ends rather than merely as means. Contractual and discourse-based theories similarly construct norms through procedures of justification. The advantage is that morality becomes publicly defensible rather than dependent upon revelation or private intuition. The danger is procedural idealization. Actual persons occupy unequal conditions. A formally rational agreement may conceal dependence, coercion, or exclusion. The procedure may already contain the values it claims to generate. Reason in ethics therefore requires more than logical consistency. It must account for vulnerability, power, material consequence, embodied

ment, consent, and the unequal distribution of risk. A moral principle that is rational only from the position of the protected is incomplete (Kant 2012).

Reason in Law and Political Authority

Modern legal systems often justify themselves through rational procedure. Laws are written, publicly promulgated, interpreted according to rules, and applied through institutions. Evidence is evaluated. Decisions require reasons. Appeals are available. Officials are expected to act within defined jurisdiction. These structures distinguish legal order from naked command. Yet legality does not guarantee rational legitimacy. An unjust law may be clearly written and consistently enforced. A discriminatory institution may operate according to precise procedures. A bureaucracy may deny a person through flawless application of a defective category. Legal rationality can become impersonal domination. The law says no individual intended the harm. The procedure functioned. The file was complete. The classification was applied. The damage remains. Reason in law must therefore be judged at several levels: Was the rule clearly formulated? Was it applied consistently? Was the evidence adequate? Was the procedure fair? Was the governing objective legitimate? Did the law respect rights and human dignity? Were affected persons capable of challenging the classification? Procedural rationality is necessary. It is not sufficient. A machine can apply an unjust rule consistently. Justice requires reason to examine the rule itself.

Mathematical and Logical Truth

Mathematics appears to provide the strongest case for rational discovery. Mathematical truths seem necessary. Two plus two does not become five because a society changes its customs. A contradiction cannot become valid through political decree. Geometric and algebraic structures can be developed through proof rather than observation alone. Yet the philosophy of mathematics remains divided. Platonism treats mathematical entities as independently real and discovered by reason. Formalism treats mathematics as the manipulation of symbols according to rules. Logicism attempts to ground mathematics in logic. Intuitionism emphasizes constructive mental activity. Even in mathematics, discovery and construction remain entangled. Mathematicians construct formal systems, definitions, axioms, and proofs. Yet once a system is established, consequences emerge that were not consciously designed. A theorem can surprise its creator. Human beings select the rules. They do not freely select every implication. Mathematical reason therefore illustrates constrained construction with unusual clarity. A rational system generates objective consequences once its foundational commitments are fixed. The unresolved question concerns the status of those foundations. Internal necessity does not automatically establish external application.

The Authority of Reason and the Problem of Exclusion

Standards of rationality can exclude. Historically, dominant groups have described subordinate populations as emotional, primitive, irrational, childlike, superstitious, or incapable of self-government. Such classifications provided intellectual cover for colonization, patriarchy, enslavement, forced assimilation, and political exclusion. The problem was not an excess of genuine reason. It was the fraudulent identification of prejudice with reason.

A standard may appear universal while reflecting the experience and interests of a narrow group. Modes of speech, education, emotional expression, cultural knowledge, and practical intelligence can be dismissed because they do not conform to institutional expectations. The position does not require abandoning standards. It requires examining how standards are formed and applied. Not every alternative perspective is equally accurate. Not every cultural belief is immune from criticism. Inclusion does not require

epistemic surrender. It requires that exclusion be justified rather than presumed. Reason must distinguish between unfamiliarity and error. Between emotional expression and logical failure. Between nonstandard speech and intellectual incapacity. Between dissent and irrationality. A rational order that cannot hear criticism from outside its established vocabulary is not universal. It is provincial power with formal grammar.

Illustrative Scenario: The Credit Model

A bank deploys a model that predicts default risk. The model assigns a high-risk score to an applicant with steady income because the applicant lives in a postal district associated with prior defaults. The bank insists that no human prejudice is involved: the score was generated by data.

The defense confuses calculation with justification. The model may calculate exactly what it was designed to calculate. The unresolved question is whether postal district is a legitimate proxy for individual risk, whether historical lending discrimination shaped the data, whether the applicant can challenge an error, and whether the institution has confused predictive convenience with moral permission.

Under the earned-jurisdiction model, the bank must disclose the relevant factors, show that they are causally and normatively appropriate, measure disparate error, and provide a meaningful appeal. A model that cannot survive these demands may still be computationally sophisticated. It has not earned authority over the applicant. The example shows why reason requires institutional conditions. Formal inference alone cannot decide what may justly be done with the inference.

The Machine That Appears to Reason

Artificial intelligence introduces a contemporary version of the problem. Computational systems can process information, identify patterns, generate text, optimize decisions, classify objects, and perform complex inferential tasks. They may appear rational because their outputs are structured, fluent, or statistically effective. Yet rational appearance does not establish understanding, truth, or moral agency. An artificial system may produce valid conclusions from flawed data. It may reproduce institutional bias. It may generate persuasive falsehood. It may optimize an objective without understanding whether the objective

is legitimate. The authority of computational reason must therefore be limited. Several distinctions are necessary: Prediction is not explanation. Consistency is not truth. Optimization is not judgment. Pattern recognition is not moral understanding. Fluency is not knowledge. Automation can amplify rational procedures while concealing responsibility. When an algorithm denies a loan, flags a defendant, filters applicants, or prioritizes medical resources, the decision may appear impersonal. Yet humans selected the training data, objectives, categories, thresholds, and acceptable error rates. The machine does not remove judgment. It buries judgment inside architecture. Rational authority cannot be delegated to a system that cannot be held responsible for the standards it applies.

Pathologies and Standards

The Failure Modes of Reason

Reason does not fail only through ignorance. It fails through corruption. Rationalization Rationalization begins with a desired conclusion and constructs reasons afterward. It imitates justification while protecting appetite, identity, status, or interest. Dogmatism Dogmatism treats foundational assumptions as beyond criticism. It uses reason inside the system while forbidding reason from examining the system. Formalism Formalism treats procedural correctness as sufficient even when substance is unjust or false. Reductionism Reductionism explains complex realities through one category and dismisses what the category cannot contain. Technocracy Technocracy transfers political and moral decisions to experts under the claim that they are merely technical. Ideological reason Ideological reason presents the interests of a group as universal necessity. Cynical reason Cynical reason recognizes contradiction but continues participating because exposure has replaced responsibility. Performative rationality Performative rationality uses complexity, terminology, data, or detached tone to produce the appearance of authority. Totalization Totalization expands one rational framework until nothing is permitted to exist outside it. These failures share one structure: Reason exempts itself from audit.

Standards for Legitimate Rational Authority

Reason deserves authority only under conditions that limit corruption. Logical coherence A claim must not depend upon contradiction, invalid inference, or equivocation. Coherence is necessary but insufficient. Evidentiary accountability Claims about reality must answer to appropriate evidence. The type of evidence will vary by domain, but unsupported certainty cannot command assent. Conceptual precision Central terms must be defined clearly enough for disagreement to be located. Openness to falsification or revision A claim must identify what could count against it. A theory protected from every possible objection has abandoned inquiry. Intersubjective criticism Others must be able to examine, challenge, and

test the reasoning. Proportional confidence The strength of the conclusion must not exceed the strength of the grounds. Practical adequacy Where a theory governs action, its material consequences must be examined. Historical awareness Reason must identify the

contingent conditions through which its categories developed. Power analysis The distribution of cost, benefit, voice, and risk must be made visible. Reflexivity The reasoning process must apply its own standards to itself. Reason becomes legitimate when it can survive examination from several directions at once.

Discovery and Construction Reconciled

The Authority of Reason as Earned Jurisdiction

Reason should not be treated as an absolute sovereign. It should be treated as an office whose jurisdiction must be earned. A rational claim earns authority when it identifies its premises, submits its evidence, survives objection, acknowledges limitation, and remains open to repair. Reason loses authority when it demands obedience without disclosure. This model resembles legitimate political power. A government does not become legitimate merely because it possesses force. A rational system does not become legitimate merely because it possesses internal structure. Both must justify jurisdiction. Reason may govern questions of logical consistency with substantial authority. It may govern empirical questions when supported by reliable evidence. It may contribute to moral and political judgment, but it cannot eliminate value conflict through calculation alone. It may organize technical means, but it cannot select human ends without normative argument. The authority of reason is domain-sensitive. Not every question submits to the same procedure. A mathematical proof, a historical interpretation, a medical judgment, a moral argument, a legal decision, and an account of grief require different forms of evidence and different standards of adequacy. To demand one method for every domain is not rational rigor. It is methodological imperialism.

Reason and Self-Government

The authority of reason is not only a public problem. It is an individual discipline. Self-government requires the ability to distinguish impulse from judgment, explanation from excuse, evidence from preference, and principle from identity. A person acts irrationally not only when making a logical error. Irrationality also appears when standards change according to convenience. Evidence that supports desire is accepted immediately. Evidence that threatens identity is subjected to impossible demands. The conduct of others is judged by consequences. One's own conduct is judged by intention. Private anger is called honesty. Another person's anger is called instability. The individual mind is an unequal court. Reason becomes a practice of sovereignty when the same standards are applied inwardly and outwardly. The position does not require emotional detachment. It requires procedural honesty. What do I believe? Why do I believe it? What evidence would change my judgment? What interest is served by the conclusion? Am I demanding more proof from an opposing claim than from my own? What consequence follows if the principle is applied consistently? Which part of the argument is fact, which is interpretation, and which is value? These questions do not guarantee wisdom. They make fraud more difficult.

A Working Theory of Rational Authority

A defensible account of rationality can be stated as follows: Reason is the human capacity and social practice through which claims, concepts, explanations, and actions are made answerable to standards of coherence, evidence, implication, criticism, and revision. This definition contains both construction and discovery. Reason constructs claims, concepts, explanations, and standards. It discovers whether those constructions survive contact with logic, experience, other minds, and the world. Its authority is not inherent in the mere use of rational language. It arises from successful accountability. The claim can be stated more compactly: Reason possesses authority only where it permits appeal. Where no criticism is allowed, reason has become command. Where no evidence can alter the conclusion, reason has become doctrine. Where no affected person can challenge the category, reason has become administration. Where no limitation is acknowledged, reason has become mythology. The highest rational act is not the declaration of certainty. It is the exposure of the grounds upon which judgment stands.

Conclusion

Reason remains indispensable because criticism itself depends upon distinctions, evidence, inference, and consistency. Yet indispensability does not confer sovereignty. Rational practices can be narrow, self-protective, and violent while retaining the surface grammar of calculation. The history of administration is full of coherent procedures built around defective classifications.

The earned-jurisdiction model preserves what is strongest in rationalism without repeating its arrogance. Reality constrains thought. Contradictions matter. Evidence can defeat desire. At the same time, every access to those constraints

is mediated by concepts, instruments, languages, and institutions. Rational authority therefore increases with transparency, reciprocal challenge, empirical contact, and demonstrated capacity for correction.

Reason should govern where it has earned the right to govern, and no further. It may defeat preference when the evidence is strong. It may organize collective life when its rules are publicly justifiable. It may discipline emotion without pretending that emotion contains no knowledge. It may guide technology without surrendering judgment to machines.

The final law of reason is reflexive: a rational order must be able to explain why its own form of explanation deserves authority. When it refuses that inquiry, reason becomes dogma in formal dress. When it accepts it, reason becomes a practice of shared self-government.