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Concentration Camps and (IR)Rationality

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Concentration camps became a subject of philosophical reflection after the Second World War. Some philosophers have linked their emergence and functioning to rationality. Skepticism toward rationality in relation to concentration camps is present in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben and Zygmunt Bauman. According to these philosophers, concentration camps hold the key to understanding modern society. It is widely acknowledged that concentration camps were, to a certain extent, effective tools of totalitarian regimes, if evaluated from the perspective of the empirical approach, but is there any moral justification for such rationalisation if their result is the transformation of a human being into an ordinary thing?A moral perspective on concentration camps may reveal their inherent irrationality *from the perspective of the transcendentalist approach*. The central thesis of this article is that in philosophical studies about concentration camps, it is necessary to distinguish two concepts of rationality – empirical and transcendentalist, only in this way it becomes clear that treating a person as a means, rather than an aim, arises from irrational reasoning. This article presents an analysis of the goals and means of concentration camps from the perspective of *Kant's categorical imperative and compares them with Karl Popper's two approaches to social construction – gradual and utopian engineering*, as well as a distinction between rationalism and irrationalism. The conclusion is made about the appropriateness of considering the problem of concentration camps from the standpoint of contrasting rationality and irrationality, rather than rationality and empiricism. With this approach, the prospects of modern society become clearer: open – thanks to rationality, and closed – through irrationality.

Keywords: concentration camp, rationality, irrationality, political philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Rationality pertains to many things. The most complex use of rationality relates to human beliefs and actions (Audi 2004: 14). Typically, rationality is measured by effectiveness. This approach is especially proposed by empirical philosophy. However, evaluating human beliefs and actions from the perspective of their rationality in terms of effectiveness is sometimes questionable.

For example, some philosophers saw a danger for humanity in the concept of rationality. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno questioned the rationality of the Enlightenment (Evans 2020; Maker 2012). In their view, the domination of nature through science turned against humanity. Knowledge became synonymous with power, which turned humans into mere objects, with the only criterion being self-preservation and a successful or unsuccessful

adaptation to the objectivity of the functions expected of them (Adorno, Horkheimer 2002: 21–22). Michel Foucault accused rationality of fostering disciplinary power (Goswami 2014), which led to the normalisation of humanity, specifically turning it into an obedient body in its smallest operations: 'Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and "cellular", but also natural and "organic"' (Foucault 1995: 156). As a result, a person cannot be identical to themselves; they must be identical to others. In such an entanglement of rationality and social reality, philosophers saw signs of a totalitarian society (Černý 2025; Kovalenko et al. 2023). Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben and Zygmunt Bauman linked this to the possibility of a concentration camp society. Although those philosophers predicted the existence of various types of concentration camps, their common feature was the transformation of human beings into completely replaceable and disposable entities. Therefore, they saw in concentration camps, as tests of a more rational social order, the key to understanding modern society.

Their emergence is a consequence of the rationality of modern society, and their functioning demonstrates the possibility of a concentration camp society. However, there is something within concentration camps that contradicts rationality. The transformation of human beings into mere tools for use and destruction cannot be a product of rational thoughts and actions. If the actions of concentration camps are evaluated in transcendentalist categories of 'human' and 'inhuman', that is, in terms of what aligns with or contradicts the rational nature of humanity, which helps it navigate what is good and what is evil, as well as understand what is shameful and what is worthy, it will become clear that they are morally unacceptable. In this context, I lean towards Leszek Kołakowski's choice of the Kantian approach, which posits that all people, each individually, since they are free and partake in the transcendental realm of rationality, have the same rights and are bound by the same duties. After all, to be 'rational' means not only to use knowledge to achieve set goals but also to take responsibility for their consequences. From such a perspective the extreme radicalism of their actions is a manifestation of irrationality.

To support this argument, I will (a) carry out the analysis of the rationality of concentration camps in the works of Arendt, Agamben and Bauman; (b) refute with the help of comparative analysis of the rationality of concentration camps based on Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and Karl Popper's distinction between two approaches to social construction: gradual and utopian engineering, as well as the distinction between rationalism and irrationalism.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND RATIONALITY

The events of the 20th century led to widespread disillusionment with rationality. The emphasis in Nazism and communism on using technology to 'free up space' by eliminating millions of 'superfluous' people called into question the supposed achievements of modern, rational society. For some thinkers, concentration camps held the key to understanding this issue.

The discussion of concentration camps was initiated by Arendt. She viewed them as laboratories for testing the totalitarian belief that 'anything is possible'. They were experiments in the scientifically controlled destruction of spontaneity – an essential aspect of human behaviour – mand in the transformation of human personality into something even lower than animals: 'into something that even animals are not' (Arendt 1951: 438). Despite differences between the German and Soviet concentration camp systems, Arendt identified common stages in the exercise of totalitarian power.

The first step was the destruction of the legal person in man. This was achieved by stripping certain groups of legal protection and compelling non-totalitarian regimes to tolerate lawlessness. Additionally, concentration camps were placed outside the normal system of punishment, and their prisoners were excluded from standard legal procedures. Arendt also noted the inclusion of criminal elements in concentration camps, which helped reinforce propaganda claims that these camps were intended for antisocial elements.

Criminals, at least, knew why they had been sent to the camps and, as a result, retained some remnants of their legal personality. Political prisoners, on the other hand, were excluded from the country's legal system and had no formal legal status. The third group in the camp population consisted of innocent people, who made up its largest category (Arendt 1951: 447–451).

The second step was the destruction of a person's moral personality. This was achieved by eliminating any possibility of individual escape and creating conditions in which moral decisions became ambiguous and uncertain. Even under such circumstances, people still sought to preserve their individuality. Arendt described several methods that totalitarian regimes used to suppress human uniqueness: inhumane transportation conditions, head shaving, standardised camp clothing, and torture. The goal of those methods was to manipulate the human body, inflict suffering, and ultimately erase the human personality.

Arendt highlighted the calculated rationality behind torture, noting that it was often used as a means to extract information from prisoners: 'This type of torture, since it pursues a definite, rational aim, has certain limitations: either the prisoner talks within a certain time, or he is killed' (Arendt 1951: 453). She contrasted this with irrational torture, which was unsystematic and driven by the whims of individual psychopaths.

The third step was the destruction of individuality itself – the eradication of spontaneity, or a person's ability to initiate something new based on their own inner resources. Arendt explained the loss of individuality through its systematic dismantling: submission while marching to gas chambers, sporadic acts of resistance, and occasional killings of executioners. She argued that the destruction of individuality produced the 'citizens' of totalitarian regimes, who could only be created in concentration camps.

According to Arendt, the methods of concentration camps were transparent and logical, leading inevitably to the creation of a 'concentration camp society': 'The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses' (Arendt 1951: 447). Thus, the totalitarian pursuit of absolute power – its drive to make 'everything possible' – was, in its own way, disturbingly rational.

Agamben examined the role of the human sciences in the emergence of concentration camps. He viewed them as states of emergency that had become the norm. In his analysis, concentration camps did not originate from legal norms but from emergency decrees and martial law. Within the camp, the distinction between legality and illegality ceased to exist. The law was not merely suspended – it became irrelevant. As a result, anything became possible.

Those confined in concentration camps existed in a liminal state, caught between exception and rule, between what was permitted and what was prohibited. They were stripped of political status and reduced entirely to what Agamben termed *bare life.*[1]

[1] The concept of 'bare life' in Agamben's philosophy traces back to the ancient Greek word *zoḗ*, which philosophers used to denote simple natural life, as opposed to *bíos* – the way of life specific to an individual or a group. According to Agamben, in the classical world, *zoḗ* was excluded from politically qualified life. In contrast, the decisive event of modernity is the politicisation of bare life.

One of Agamben's central arguments was that the key question about concentration camps is not a rhetorical inquiry into how such atrocities could have been committed, but rather a rigorous examination of the legal and political mechanisms that enabled human beings to be stripped of their rights and rendered expendable: 'And then indeed everything became possible' (Agamben 1998: 97). He was particularly concerned with how fields at the intersection of politics, philosophy, medicine, biological sciences and law contributed to the emergence of *bare life* – and why these disciplines failed to fully grasp the catastrophic consequences of their own historical development.

Agamben reasoned that if the essence of the concentration camp is the materialisation of a state of emergency – a space where *bare life* and the law become indistinguishable – then the replication of such a structure means that camps can reappear in different forms, regardless of their name, location, or the severity of crimes committed there. In this sense, the emergence of concentration camps serves as a defining feature of modern political space: 'The camp is the *nomos* of modernity' (Agamben 1998: 99).

Bauman described concentration camps as '*a gloomy invention of the modern world*' – an outcome made possible by rationality, technology and science (Bauman 2001: 268). He compared the operations of concentration camps to the work of gardeners, a metaphor derived from his understanding of modern culture as a '*gardening*' culture.

According to Bauman, modern culture defines itself as a project aimed at creating an ideal society through the perfect organisation of human conditions. It constructs its identity based on a fundamental distrust of nature, distinguishing itself from it by rejecting spontaneity in favour of an artificial, regulated order. Within this framework, all actions become instrumental, and all individuals are categorised as either contributing to or obstructing the realisation of this ideal.

Bauman also emphasised that concentration camps could not have functioned without an *ethic of submissiveness*. Drawing on Stanley Milgram's psychological research, he argued that cruelty is not typically carried out by inherently cruel individuals but by ordinary people striving to fulfill their perceived duties. This underscores the role of authority-subordinate relationships in enabling atrocities. Furthermore, distance from the victim plays a crucial role – when perpetrators cannot see or hear their victims, cruelty becomes far easier to commit. This psychological detachment facilitates the transformation of ordinary individuals into oppressors and their victims into mere subjects of subjugation.

As demonstrated by several philosophers, concentration camps are deeply connected to the rationality of modernity. However, what often escapes scholarly attention is that their existence was equally dependent on the *denial* of rationality. As Dan Stone insightfully observes, while concentration camps can be understood as products of modernity and its focus on instrumental rationality, there is an undeniable element of madness that such descriptions fail to fully capture:

> 'In the abstract, concentration camps might appear to be the logical conclusion of modernity, if by that is meant an indefinite extension of state power and a belief in "scientific" solutions to social "problems". But [...] concentration camps have always been about more than modernization. They are places of punishment, of discipline, where specific regimes' worldviews are actualized [...] There is an aspect of concentration camps that simply cannot be captured by describing them as manifestations of "absolute power" or as the "nomos of the modern". The camp is a product of modernity but also embodies a desire to overthrow rationality: a desire to abandon all limits, to transgress the moral law, and to engage in a kind of organized frenzy' (Stone 2019: 103–104).

If concentration camps are assessed purely in efficiency from the viewpoint of an empirical approach, then under certain conditions, the transformation of a human being into a replaceable object may indeed appear rational. However, should such rationalisation be considered an achievement if the regimes that employed these methods were never meant to become more efficient? We can be convinced of this if we evaluate the actions of the concentration camps from the perspective of a transcendentalist approach. If there are grounds to reasonably believe that there are factors that can balance out the bad consequences of the actions taken, then they are irrational.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND IRRATIONALITY

According to Leszek Kołakowski, the charge of irrationality is most compelling when directed at those who are intellectually equipped to recognise obvious contradictions between ends and means. Intellectuals who, in their defense of justice and freedom, aligned themselves with totalitarian regimes – such as National Socialism, Stalinism, or Maoism – have provided numerous examples of astonishingly flawed judgments and willful blindness. In such cases, Kołakowski advocated assessing the actions and objectives of individuals and political institutions[2] through the lens of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative (Kolakowski 1985: 290).

Kant argued that the primary criterion for distinguishing good actions from bad ones should be adherence to a principle that aligns with the categorical imperative – obeying the law out of respect for the law itself. To ensure this principle serves as an effective moral guide, he formulated three well-known maxims: act only according to a maxim that can be willed as a universal law; always treat humanity – both in yourself and in others – as an end, never merely as a means; act as if your will were the legislator of a universal moral law (Kant 1997: 446–455).

Kant's categorical imperative provides a framework for evaluating the morality of concentration camps. These camps epitomise unrestrained arbitrariness, where law is transformed into terror. Within them, the absolute value of a person as an end in itself is reduced to the relative value of a mere object. In such a system, human life holds no intrinsic worth, and sacrificing individuals – the most precious aspect of humanity – can only be judged as profoundly evil. This evil is neither justifiable nor foreseeable in any rational sense. Ultimately, it is this moral atrocity that calls into question the rationality of concentration camps. While their structure and function can be described, their existence defies true comprehension.

Former prisoners of concentration camps cannot understand this either. For example, for the philosopher Julius Margolin, a prisoner of the Soviet Union's concentration camps in 1940–1945, it was nonsense to hear 'arguments' in favour of the need for senseless torture of people to 'protect the German people from the Jews' or to re-educate 'backward and criminal elements' through Soviet camps. He did not believe that he had offended the Germans in any way and needed Stalin's re-education, and even if he had, it would not justify the gas chambers and the enslavement of millions of people. According to Margolin, the whole avalanche of human and inhuman suffering, which seems like a kind of natural disaster to little people, is well known to the people who hold the keys of power. These people are responsible for its

[2] According to Leszek Kolakowski, there is nothing logically suspicious in some stretching of the meaning of the concept of 'rationality' from a trait of human behaviour to the activities of political systems. If people identify themselves with the values that a given system is supposed to embody, then they consider themselves the bearers or guardians of these values.

existence at every minute and second. They set it in motion and control it, and it exists not because of their ignorance or powerlessness, but precisely because they know exactly what they are doing, and they are doing exactly what they need to do. Margolin believed that the natural opponent of such people is reason. They despise free thought and deny intelligence (Margolin 2023: 448–449). We can only add that they justify their numerous crimes with pseudo-historical mythology and outright lies (Dyiak, Volobuiev 2025: 81).

If, as some philosophers argue, the operation of concentration camps demonstrates the potential for a concentration camp society, then this form of social construction can be compared to Karl Popper's two approaches to societal development: gradual engineering and utopian engineering. This comparison seems appropriate here in view of the influence of Kant's philosophy on Popper's.

Gradual engineering is the only approach that can be considered truly rational. It involves setting a clear objective and identifying incremental goals that serve as means to achieve it. In the realm of political action, this requires defining an ultimate aim, selecting the most effective methods for its realisation, and developing a practical plan of action. A gradual engineer focuses on addressing the most pressing social issues through reasoned, step-by-step reforms aimed at improving human welfare. These projects are not overly complex; they rely on a broad consensus regarding existing social problems and rational solutions to address them. By employing small-scale social experiments, gradual engineering allows for continuous adjustments, ensuring that politicians identify and correct their mistakes, rather than justifying them. In this way, it introduces the scientific method into politics, fostering democratic progress through trial and improvement.

Utopian engineering, on the other hand, lacks rationality because it may or may not have a clear goal and may or may not have a realistic means of achieving it. By ignoring the distinction between long-term objectives and intermediate steps, it fails to evaluate whether individual actions actually contribute to the final goal – thus making rational action impossible. The utopian engineer pursues an ideal vision, often resorting to violence instead of reason, ultimately increasing human suffering. This approach frequently leads to dictatorship. Unlike gradual engineering, utopian engineering seeks large-scale, radical social transformations. Since its experiments must be applied to an entire society, the potential consequences are unpredictable and irreversible. Moreover, once significant sacrifices have been made in pursuit of a utopian plan, there is a strong tendency toward dogmatic adherence, even when the plan fails. The success or failure of such an experiment is often tied to powerful interests, making it even less likely to be adjusted based on reason or empirical evidence.

Popper specifically focused on a key aspect of utopian engineering – its extreme radicalism – and linked it with aestheticism: the desire to create a world that is not only slightly better or more rational than our current one, but also devoid of all its imperfections**.** He explained that aestheticism can have value, but only when it is tempered by reason, a sense of responsibility**,** and a humane desire to help others.Without these checks, however, it becomes a dangerous enthusiasm that can degenerate into neurosis or hysteria**.** Popper rejected the idea that human lives could be used as means to fulfill an artist's need for self-expression. The view that society should be constructed like a beautiful work of art can easily lead to violent measures. Popper called this irrational tendency, born out of an obsession with a beautiful world, romanticism (Popper 1947 a: 138–148).

The distinctions between incremental and utopian engineering can be summarised in the following table:

Incremental engineering	Utopian engineering
Compatibility of ends and means	Incompatibility of ends and means
Solving individual social problems based on reason	The desire to build an ideal society through violence
Decentralised leadership	Centralised leadership
Small-scale experiments	Large-scale experiments
Scientific method in politics	Dogmatism in politics
Ethical rationalism and tolerance	Aestheticism and radicalism

The similarities between utopian engineering and concentration camps are striking. Both share a peculiar ontology – the dehumanisation of individuals. Concentration camps are marked by the incompatibility of goals and means, and the reduction of human existence to mere statistics underscores their irrationality. The desire to construct an ideal society through violence was evident in both the Naziand Soviet concentration camps. Although Nazism and communism appeared to be irreconcilable enemies at first glance, similarities in their ideologies can be found. One such similarity, according to Volodymyr Yermolenko, is the theme of the collective absolute, which is 'embodied' in increasingly 'particular' communities or individuals: 'If one group of people is the absolute, in which humanity is fully "embodied", then other groups of people, in the end, are not very necessary. If they interfere with this absolute, they must be destroyed' (Yermolenko 2018: 360). Another shared feature is the large-scale experiment. The goal of concentration camps is to recreate the impossible: a universal human type, rather than specific individuals. To achieve this, society must be transformed into a space where all people are rendered insignificant and uniform. Bauman discussed this radicalism and aestheticism when he compared the camps to the work of gardeners. The aim of this 'creative'process is the elimination of those who do not fit into the ideal society. In the Soviet Union, this 'aestheticism' was captured in the phrase: 'The forest is cut down, the chips fly.'

If we assess the actions of concentration camps through the lens from the perspective of the transcendentalist approach, we can see that transforming a person into a mere thing is irrational**.**

In this context, Popper's study of the conflict between rationalism and irrationalism is also valuable. The philosopher used the term 'rationalism' in a broad sense, encompassing both empiricism and intellectualism, and denoting in general terms the direction of seeking to solve as many problems as possible by appealing to reason, i.e. to clear thinking and experience, rather than to emotions and impulses (Popper 1947 b: 212). In this sense, Popper opposes rationalism not so much to empiricism as to irrationalism, which insists that 'human nature' is not primarily rational but is driven by emotions and passions.

Popper distinguishes between two positions of rationalism: critical rationalism and uncritical or total rationalism. Critical rationalism recognises the fact that the rationalist approach is fundamentally based on an act of faith in reason. Uncritical or total rationalism is the approach taken by a person who says that he or she is not going to accept anything that is not justified by evidence or experience (Popper 1947 b: 217). Popper considered the choice between critical and uncritical or total rationalism not only an intellectual or tasteful matter, but a moral decision that 'will deeply affect our whole attitude towards other men, and towards the problems of social life' (Popper 1947 b: 219).

According to Popper, it is irrationalism that causes inequality in society, as it leads to the division of humanity into friends and enemies (Popper 1947 b: 222). In such circumstances, political equality becomes impossible, and anti-egalitarianism can be used to justify murder. Eventually, irrationalism leads to crime.

In Popper's understanding, authoritarianism and rationalism cannot be combined, because the rationalisation of society is based on the idea of impartiality and responsibility. Rationalism is the realisation that one should not rely too much on reason, that evidence does not always exhaust the problem. Rationalism also implies a moral obligation towards other people. Irrationalism can also use reason, but it has no obligation to use it: 'Clever men may be very unreasonable' (Popper 1947 b: 214).

Popper rejected the criticism of modern science. For him, it meant a return to a closed society. He believed that scientific theories are controlled by the practical implications of them, and researchers are responsible for what they say. Only science guarantees people rational unity and life in an open society. The philosopher refuted the denial of the morality of science on the basis of the fact that there are no things in the world that cannot be used with bad intentions. Thus, love can become a means of murder, and pacifism can become a weapon of aggression (Popper 1947 b: 230). It is irrationality, not rationality, that is responsible for hostility or aggression. It is man who is responsible for his actions.

CONCLUSIONS

If rationality is measured from the perspective of a transcendentalist approach, it will turn out that keeping people in inhumane conditions and treating them as mere things, not because of powerlessness or ignorance, but because of a clear understanding of the goal and persistent pursuit of it, is not rational. Rationality is not the justification of expediency or reasoning about the unthinkable. Rationality is tied to humanity, reason, freedom and responsibility. A person is rational not simply because they have the ability to think, but because they are obliged to think responsibly at all times. Considering the problem of concentration camps from the standpoint of opposing rationality and irrationality, rather than rationality and empiricism, outlines the prospects of modern society more clearly: open – due to rationality and closed – due to irrationality.

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Koncentracijos stovyklos ir (i)racionalumas

Santrauka

Po Antrojo pasaulinio karo koncentracijos stovyklos tapo filosofinių apmąstymų objektu. Kai kurie filosofai jų atsiradimą ir veikimą susiejo su racionalumu. Šiuo atžvilgiu skeptiški yra Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agambenas ir Zygmuntas Baumanas. Pasak šių filosofų, koncentracijos stovyklos yra raktas į šiuolaikinės visuomenės supratimą. Visuotinai pripažįstama, kad koncentracijos stovyklos tam tikru mastu buvo veiksmingos totalitarinių režimų priemonės, vertinant empiriniu požiūriu, tačiau ar yra koks nors moralinis tokio racionalizavimo pagrindimas, jei jų rezultatas yra žmogaus pavertimas įprastu daiktu? Moralinė koncentracijos stovyklų perspektyva gali atskleisti jiems būdingą neracionalumą transcendentaliuoju požiūriu. Pagrindinė šio straipsnio tezė yra ta, kad filosofinėse studijose apie koncentracijos stovyklas būtina išskirti dvi racionalumo sąvokas: empirinę ir transcendentaliąją. Taip tampa aišku, kad žmogaus traktavimas kaip priemonės, o ne tikslo, kyla iš iracionalaus samprotavimo. Šiame straipsnyje pateikiama koncentracijos stovyklų tikslų ir priemonių analizė Kanto kategorinio imperatyvo požiūriu. Tai lyginama su dviem Karlo Popperio požiūriais į socialinę konstrukciją – laipsnišką ir utopinę inžineriją, taip pabrėžiant skirtumą tarp racionalizmo ir iracionalizmo. Daroma išvada, kad koncentracijos stovyklų problemą tikslingiau nagrinėti per racionalumo ir neracionalumo, o ne racionalizmo ir empirizmo prizmę. Šiuo požiūriu aiškėja šiuolaikinės visuomenės perspektyvos: atvira – per racionalumą, uždara – per iracionalumą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: koncentracijos stovykla, racionalumas, iracionalumas, politinė filosofija