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THE INDISPENSABILITY OF METAPHYSICAL REALISM

By

John D. Mariana

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ABSTRACT

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF METAPHYSICAL REALISM

By

John D. Mariana

The past hundred years or so have witnessed increased philosophical attention devoted to elaborating and defending competing versions of empiricism, naturalism and pragmatism, and a corresponding decrease in philosophical confidence in rationalism and traditional metaphysical realism. There are, to be sure, a number of reasons for this, but the discovery of alternative logics and alternative geometries, coupled with several dramatic nineteenth and twentieth century revolutions in scientific knowledge, have perhaps done the most to erode belief in the possibility of genuine *a priori* knowledge about a determinately structured reality. This has prompted a number of philosophers, beginning at least with the logical positivists, to insist that traditional metaphysical questions about the structure of reality in itself are unanswerable (or cannot even be properly asked) because they are either meaningless or unintelligible, or involve terms that lack any knowable referent. In short, their claim is that traditional metaphysical questions cannot be answered because they surpass the bounds of human understanding.

This claim is, of course, quite in line with empiricist epistemological commitments generally, but, as an apparently universal claim about the scope and limits of human knowledge, it immediately prompts the following question: what could an empiricist possibly appeal to in support of such a statement? It should (I hope) be immediately apparent that there are only two options here. The first would of course be to argue that traditional metaphysical questions are unintelligible or meaningless by

offering an empirical account of language acquisition, but this would obviously involve begging the question against the metaphysician.

The only other option, however, would be to turn to a universal theory of meaning that would enable us to say precisely why metaphysical questions could not possibly be meaningful. But if this theory is not to be empirically supported, how could it possibly claim to establish the bounds of meaningfulness for all possible languages without itself requiring the support of a realist metaphysics, coupled with a rationalist epistemology that accounts for our *a priori* awareness of this synthetic universal truth? In other words, the conditions of the success of the empiricist's argument require its failure.

So why not just abandon the original attempt to rule out metaphysical realism, along with any attempt to produce a universal theory of meaning? This is out of the question, because there can be no rational argument for doing so. Any argument intended to support the conclusion that we should abandon all attempts to construct a successful universal theory of meaning would eliminate whatever rational basis we might have had for thinking that the premises of the argument itself are themselves meaningful.

If what I have said here is correct, then we have the following results. First, there can be no successful argument against the very possibility of *a priori* knowledge of a determinately structured reality. And secondly, since we can have no rational basis for abandoning the attempt to construct a successful universal theory of meaning, our attempts to develop such a theory must provide an explanation of how we can have *a priori* knowledge, since any successful theory of meaning must assume that such knowledge is possible. Thus, we cannot possibly dispense with metaphysical realism.

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To PLATO

who got me started

and

To BETH

who keeps me going

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PREFACE

It would seem to me most natural to note, by way of opening remarks, the extent to which contemporary philosophy has come to be dominated by empiricism and pragmatism. My impression is that rationalism and metaphysical realism are minority views as things stand, and that any defense of either one must first address the prevailing consensus that these positions have been decisively exposed as untenable, before such a defense can even properly get down to business. Other authors, such as Jerrold J. Katz and Laurence Bonjour, who have recently offered defenses of both rationalism and traditional realism have, however, opened their works with laments over the current dominion of empiricism, and these laments have been met with bemused replies in the literature. I must, then, address myself first to these replies.

Katz remarks, in the Introduction to his *Realistic Rationalism*, that “[I]n the course of this century, a large segment of Anglo-American philosophy was persuaded to abandon the traditional conception of philosophy on which it is an *a priori* inquiry into the most general facts about reality.”¹ He claims that this conception of philosophy has been replaced by “one or another of two naturalist conceptions of philosophy: philosophy as therapy designed to cure the linguistic illness of which philosophy itself is the cause, and philosophy as an *a posteriori* discipline within natural science.”² Indeed, it is Katz’s view that the Wittgensteinian and Quinean approaches to philosophy are now taken to be the only serious contenders on the contemporary scene. He argues that once “the broad notion of analyticity, which served as the logical empiricist’s basis for *a priori*

¹ Katz 2000, p. xi.

² Ibid.

knowledge, disappears” in the wake of Quinean and Wittgensteinian holism, what remains of rationalism goes with it.³ Thus, according to Katz, “the only issue left unresolved by the linguistic turn, the issue that today divides Anglo-American philosophy, is whether it is Wittgenstein’s ontological naturalism with its positivistic and therapeutic emphasis or Quine’s epistemic naturalism with its scientistic and pragmatic emphasis that goes in its place.”⁴

Alex Oliver, in his review of *Realistic Rationalism*, is nonplused. “This is not how it feels on this side of the Atlantic,” he coolly reports, “but then ‘Anglo-American’, like ‘Continental’, is more a term of sociology than geography.”⁵ Could this be the same Alex Oliver whose quest has been to deflate plural noun phrases by finding an appropriate formal notation through which to capture their logical function? But never mind. Not being on the other side of the Atlantic, I can’t say how things feel there. There has been, after all, a great deal of philosophical work underway “on the Continent,” to which Britain is closer (at least geographically), which is not so thoroughly preoccupied with Wittgenstein and Quine: existentialism, phenomenology, critical theory, and hermeneutics, for instance. Anglo-American philosophers have certainly taken notice of, and pursued, these sorts of philosophical projects, and it was certainly a gross overstatement on Katz’s part to claim that the battle between Quinean and Wittgensteinian holism is *the* issue that today divides Anglo-American philosophy.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that in his survey and retrospective of twentieth century analytic philosophy, Avrom Stroll names Wittgenstein as the greatest

³ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Oliver 2000, p. 111.

philosopher of the century.⁶ Indeed, Stroll considers Wittgenstein to be perhaps “the most original philosopher since Kant.”⁷ He also gives exceedingly high marks to Quine, however, noting that other twentieth century philosophers, such as Austin, “fail the criterion of scope” – that is, they are not sufficiently wide-ranging in their thinking and their work – and that we are thus “left with Quine and Wittgenstein.”⁸ But while Quine is a brilliant philosopher, he also ultimately fails the criterion of scope.⁹ For Stroll’s money, then, Wittgenstein carries the day as the most influential and wide-ranging philosophical figure of the twentieth century, despite the fact that Wittgenstein produced no ethics, no metaphysics (of course), no philosophy of science, no aesthetics, no political theory, no philosophy of law or of rights, no serious social theory to speak of, and, depending upon whom one asks, no philosophical theory at all (only therapy). What about Bertrand Russell, who is sometimes identified as the founder of analytic philosophy? Stroll tells us that we have already seen the “etiolation of the reputations of Russell, Moore, Carnap, and Ryle.”¹⁰ Are we so soon living in the time of the posterity of the twentieth century, despite the fact that every living philosopher was born before the year 2000? When current philosophical preoccupations die away, can we be so sure that someone like Russell will not be the one who is remembered? What about Heidegger? Stroll does not even include him in the ranks of analytic philosophers, although his *Being and Time* is a deeply analytic work if it is anything.¹¹ But then, “analytic,” like “continental,” is more a

⁶ Stroll 2000, p. 253.

⁷ Ibid., p. 251.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 252.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 250-251.

¹¹ Heidegger (1962, p. 1) announces, on the first page of *Being and Time*, that “it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of Being,” inasmuch as we do not “in our time have an answer to the

term of sociology than philosophy, and “Continental” figures like Heidegger do not even appear on analytic radar screens.

Oliver also complains that Katz’s history of Anglo-American philosophy since the linguistic turn is “very broad brush.”¹² He characterizes Katz’s account as “history with villains.”¹³ Anyone who does not find dismissals of rationalism and metaphysical realism frequent in contemporary philosophical literature, however, does not read contemporary philosophical literature. Such dismissals might appear infrequent only because the dismissive attitude they reflect has come to be taken so much for granted that such dismissals have become routine to the point of being banal – often being expressed in exactly the same, or nearly the same terms. One finds it commonplace for philosophers who are neither metaphysicians nor epistemologists to report that there is agreement that the traditional conception of philosophy as a metaphysical and epistemological enterprise can no longer seriously be sustained, that awareness of reality as such, or of a mind-independent world, has been recognized to be impossible, and that the standpoint which would be necessary for such awareness is unavailable to human knowers. Kai Nielsen claims that we should “set aside the ontotheological tradition of philosophy – the grand old tradition of philosophy,” which consists of “the foundationalist epistemological tradition” and “the grand metaphysical tradition,” which Rorty has shown to be “moonshine.”¹⁴ Susan Bordo, in her critical review of Cartesian philosophy, *The Flight*

question of what we really mean by the word ‘being’.” If that is not a call for an analysis, then I don’t know what is.

¹² Oliver 2000, p. 111.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nielsen, pp. 3, 11, and 33. The unapologetically contemptuous tone of Nielsen’s language cannot be missed, even in these few quotations, which forces one to conclude either that Nielsen thinks there are no adherents of the tradition left who might be offended by his tone, or that he is an unpleasant person. Be that as may, I should only like to note, in conjunction with Nielsen’s use of the term “ontotheological” as a

to *Objectivity*, objects to what she calls the “anticultural attitude” of traditional philosophy. This attitude, she claims, “has been essential to the discipline’s conception of itself as ‘cultural overseer,’ able to transcend history and discover an ultimate ‘neutral framework’ within which to situate other human endeavors or describe reality.”¹⁵ She notes, however, that philosophy “has been forced to recognize that its ‘enduring’ issues and ‘timeless’ concerns are the products of very particular cultural circumstances.”¹⁶ Iris Marion Young and Maria Lugones criticize the vaunted impartiality and objectivity of reason on the grounds that impartial and objective reason “leaves behind the particular perspectives from which it begins, and reconstructs them as mere appearances as opposed to the reality that objective reason apprehends,” thus ignoring, trivializing, and obscuring differences in its quest for unity and for a privileged perspective on the nature of reality.¹⁷ Young regards such a standpoint as simply impossible, since “the experience of these [‘mere’] appearances, however, is itself part of reality,” and Lugones claims that the impartial and objective reasoner is “a fiction of his own imagination,” “shot through and though” with “paradoxical incoherence.”¹⁸ Konstantin Kolenda argues that we should refrain from teaching philosophy in what he calls “the realist mode,” and should bring our recognition of the demise of the metaphysical and epistemological tradition of philosophy to the classroom: “The recommendation proceeds from the *assumption* that a historicist approach, combined with the acknowledgment of the centrality of language, would put

catch-all descriptive term for traditional metaphysics and epistemology, that adherence to traditional realism is sometimes diagnosed by anti-realists as arising out of a desire for the universe to have a God who could underwrite human knowledge à la Descartes.

¹⁵ Bordo 1987, p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Young 1990, p. 102.

the teaching of philosophy on a sounder track.”¹⁹ Kolenda insists that “[b]y letting go of the (mistaken) idea that philosophy has access to special facts and concepts indigenous to its own domain, philosophers, both as practitioners and as teachers, are likely to play a more useful role in the intellectual life of our culture.”²⁰

Now where would these philosophers have gotten these ideas? It would not be sensible to enter into a detailed account of the historical background of the state of contemporary philosophy in this preface; historiography of this sort is too dicey, too controversial, and too likely to produce the impression that what follows the historical account hinges on its accuracy. I will need, of course, to discuss what I take to be the historical and philosophical basis for the rejection of rationalism and traditional realism, but I believe that this basis can be elaborated in terms that are quite generally recognizable, and do not require a great deal of storytelling. I also believe that one of the faults of recent attempts to defend rationalism and metaphysical realism is that they have not addressed themselves to the broadest and historically deepest motives for rejecting these positions, and so have not offered a challenge to the empiricist and pragmatist traditions at their roots: namely, the supposed elimination of transcendental metaphysics and the fundamental failure of the rationalist project. Although both Ayer and positivism are now gone, the legacy of “The Elimination of Metaphysics” lies not in its relationship

¹⁸ Ibid.; and Lugones 1994, p. 467. Bordo’s, Young’s, and Lugones’ criticisms all turn, to some extent, on another fairly common diagnosis of adherence to traditional realism (and rationalism) as arising from a desire for social control and domination.

¹⁹ Kolenda 1992, p. 121, *italics mine*.

²⁰ Ibid. It’s hard to see how letting go of the idea that philosophy has any specific or special subject matter is going to enable philosophy to play a *more useful* role in the intellectual life of our culture, or, for that matter, a more useful role in the intellectual life of the university. Indeed, it’s hard to see how letting go of this idea is even consistent with philosophers’ insistence that we deserve a portion of the university’s resources. I submit that it is not an accident that while enrollments in “core” philosophy courses are falling,

to the promotion of positivistic philosophy, but in its crystallization of a movement in philosophy away from pure reason which is still underway. This movement is animated by the confident belief that metaphysical realism is untenable, that foundationalist rationalism is a lost cause, and that philosophy can and must do without them, and be done without them. I believe, however, that the attempts that have been made in the past century to philosophize without metaphysical realism have failed in their central ambition – they have appeared to repudiate metaphysical realism only by covertly appealing to metaphysically realist postulates of their own. If I am right about this, and about the reasons I shall offer as to why these attempts have failed, it will remain only to examine and undermine the motives which caused philosophers to attempt this elimination of metaphysics in the first place, and to show not only how rationalism and metaphysical realism might be renewed, but also why such projects remain indispensable to philosophy.

enrollments in “Critical Thinking” are still burgeoning. What else, these days, are philosophy teachers good for? Seems to me that we’ve historicized ourselves right out of business.

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CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTATIONALISM, THE RISE OF EMPIRICISM, AND THE REJECTION OF REALIST METAPHYSICS

It is well known that Descartes disapproved of the methods, principles, and assumptions of the “Schoolmen,” the Catholic Scholastic academics who still controlled much of higher learning in seventeenth-century Europe. It is also well known that Descartes established foundationalism as an epistemological position because he believed that to secure our entire system of beliefs we must begin with indubitable propositions. It is less well appreciated, however, just how and why these two facts are related (although much has been written on the subject), and it is rarely, if ever, observed that what Descartes took himself to be doing was reforming philosophy specifically through the elimination of speculative metaphysics. He was appalled most by what he perceived to be the unruly and brazen insecurity of Scholastic metaphysical postulates. He had thus become convinced that if he “wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences,” he would have to “to begin again from the first foundations.”¹ His goal was to identify a method that would distinguish legitimate from illegitimate bases for belief, and that would prepare legitimately grounded beliefs for certification, thus establishing with certainty our knowledge of the world. In short, he was hoping to provide philosophy as a whole with the sort of security enjoyed by the most rigorous logical proofs. In aspiring to the successful completion of such a project – the reformation of philosophy through the elimination of speculative metaphysics and the development of a secure metaphysics –

¹ Descartes 1979, p. 13.

Descartes established himself, in fact, as the ur-positivist.² The speculative (that is, unsecured), largely Aristotelian metaphysics of the Schoolmen was to be replaced with a secure and certifiable metaphysics that would provide an account of both the possibility and the actuality of our knowledge of the world outside our minds.

Descartes' metaphysics was a version of representationalism that borrowed from the Scholastic metaphysics he intended to eliminate.³ His view, in brief, was that our awareness of objects in the world was a result of the objects giving rise to impressions or representations of themselves in our minds through the medium of our senses. The representational features of an idea are dictated by the actual features of the object it represents; our ideas are in this sense literally informed by their objects. For Descartes, of course, what guarantees that our senses can and do carry out this task successfully is that our senses, along with the rest of our corporeal and non-corporeal faculties, were created by a non-deceitful, benevolent God. Descartes believed that the existence and benevolence of God could be established with certainty, which would, in turn, establish with certainty the accuracy (or, at least, the capacity for accuracy) of our senses. A

² As Moritz Schlick says, in "Positivism and Realism:" (1959, p. 83) "If every view is to be labeled positivist, which denies the possibility of metaphysics, then nothing can be said against it as a mere definition, and in *this* sense I would have to declare myself a strict positivist." It is in this sense that Descartes founded, at once, both the modern rationalist and the modern empiricist traditions. He meant to declare what he regarded as speculative metaphysics to be impossible. Schlick continues: "[positivists] are always talking of the 'given,' and state their basic principle mostly by saying that, like the scientist, the philosopher must abide throughout in the given." Descartes would have agreed; any disagreement lies only in what can be said to be taken to be given, as Schlick goes on to point out.

³ Note the Aristotelian (even Platonic) flavor of the notion of an idea's being *informed* by the object it represents. The notion seems to be this: the form of the object is transmitted to the mind so that the mental item – the idea – that represents (or depicts, or reflects) the object captures or figures its form. It is not fully worked out by Descartes in the *Meditations* just how ideas represent their objects (whether ideas are literally little pictures of their objects, or merely serve to register their formal elements and the relations between them, or what), and there is, in fact, some disagreement about how, exactly, Descartes conceived of the nature of representation (see Anthony Kenny 1968, chapter 5). To be sure, the conceptual underpinnings of this theory of mental representation are not strictly Aristotelian (or Platonic), but were worked out to some degree by Scholastic and Medieval philosophers long before Descartes put them to this use. The notion of form that serves as the basis of his theory can, however, be traced back to the ancients.

benevolent God would, after all, not have equipped us with senses that are wrong all of the time, so they must be capable of providing us with accurate information about the world and its objects, and must actually do so at least some of the time. Descartes relied upon his proofs for the existence of God to certify his representationalist schema, and these proofs would themselves constitute a self-certifying secure metaphysics, as against the speculative metaphysics of the Schoolmen, which, though dependent upon God, did not rest upon indubitable foundations, and so remained unmethodical, unverifiable, and uncertain (and, thus, could not constitute knowledge).

Representationalism, as codified by Descartes, exerted a powerful influence over the minds of Western philosophers, and continues to do so to this day. It offers such an intuitively agreeable metaphysical picture of the possibility of our knowledge of things that its pull seems to be nearly irresistible, as we shall soon see. What makes its popularity so remarkable is that it has survived despite being completely and soundly repudiated not even one hundred years after the publication of Descartes' *Meditations*. By that point, arguments to the effect that it is impossible to establish the existence of anything (much less God) by deductive proof were well known, and Hume was quick to point out that without God, representationalism had nothing and no one to vouch for it. The point is essentially the same one that Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty and others have become so fond of making: there is no way for us to stand outside our own system of ideas (or conceptual scheme, or language, or whatever), and see that our ideas and their objects are connected to each other in the way representationalism says they are.⁴ Any

⁴ Putnam and Rorty seem to treat this as a refutation of metaphysical realism and rationalism *simpliciter*, though of course it is not, as should be fairly obvious. It would, perhaps, serve as such a refutation if representationalism were the only plausible version of rationalism available, or the only epistemological

attempt to do so (if such a thing could even be imagined) would just involve more concepts or ideas, whose relation to the world and its objects would be in the same boat as the rest of our system.

We can see why Descartes felt he needed to rely on his proofs of the existence of God to certify his representationalism – what besides God possibly could certify such an epistemology? If our epistemology calls for our awareness, and ultimately our knowledge, of the world to involve the world's having a certain sort of effect upon our minds through our senses, establishing that this epistemology is correct requires that we can confirm that this relationship holds. To do so, we would either have to be able to observe that it holds (which, of course, we cannot), appeal to someone or something that could make such an observation or could be *a priori* aware that the relationship holds, or appeal to *a priori* considerations of our own. In the absence of deductive proofs of the existence of God, our own *a priori* considerations are all that we have left, and Hume argued that no such considerations were available. Thus, there seems to be no way to establish that representationalism is an accurate picture of the relation between the mind and the world, and, what is worse, this vitiates it as an epistemological position, since this relation is itself part of the world, and so should be capable of accurate representation.⁵ It seems, however, to be simply impossible to represent the representation-relation (or, at least, to know that we have done so properly), since we may ask of any representation of

basis for metaphysical realism. I believe that, in fact, this is precisely what Putnam and Rorty suppose, but in this I think they are mistaken. I will return to this point in Chapters Four and Five.

⁵ It could be said that we ought to accept representationalism on *inductive* grounds, as the best explanation of our experience of the world as consisting of medium-sized discrete physical objects. This is, in fact, the position of scientific realism: namely, that while representationalism cannot be established, it can still be maintained abductively. Of course, quantum physics puts a great deal of pressure on the idea that there even are medium-sized physical objects, so no naïve construal of representationalism seems plausible. Still, some sort of more sophisticated form of representationalism could perhaps be advanced. I shall argue in Chapter Five, however, that Rorty has revealed representationalism to be untenable in *any* form.

the relation itself how we know that this representation accurately represents its object, which leads to an infinite regress.⁶

Kant could not, however, accept the skeptical Humean conclusion that we simply cannot say anything about the source(s) of our impressions and, ultimately, our ideas. He could see that Hume was right about Cartesian representationalism, and about representationalism in general, but was dissatisfied with where Hume left things. Kant felt that, by recognizing the inherent untenability of representationalism, Hume had very nearly brought philosophy to the revolution in metaphysics that Descartes had himself envisioned, but had stopped just short, and had, in effect, repudiated metaphysics altogether.⁷ This, to Kant, was unacceptable: Hume “ran his ship ashore, for safety’s sake, landing on skepticism, there to let it lie and rot,” whereas he “certainly struck a spark from which light might be obtained, had it caught some inflammable substance

⁶ The only apparent way out of this problem would seem to be to show that the representation of the representation-relation stands in the same relation to the relation itself as is depicted in the representation of this relation. Unless we could do so on *a priori* grounds, however, there would seem to be no way to do this. This, I believe, is the reason why Putnam and Rorty maintain that any attempt to do so would just involve more (intratheoretical) concepts, and thus launch us upon an infinite regress: they maintain that none of our concepts or ideas are “privileged” over against any other, which is just as much as to say that there are no *a priori* concepts or ideas. Naturally, given such an empiricistic assumption, it would be impossible, using the resources of our conceptual scheme, to raise ourselves up out of our conceptual scheme so as to have a look at the whole thing, in addition to its “fit” with reality itself. Any time we ask the question “How do our concepts hook on to reality?” we can answer only by appealing to more concepts, about which we can always ask “how do *they* hook on to reality?” and so on, and so on.

Even if we do not go along with such a general rejection of *a priori* reasoning, however, there is good reason to think that there is no way to support representationalism on an *a priori* basis, and, thus, no way to support it at all. I shall argue, in Chapter Five, that the best way out of this problem is to reject representationalism altogether in favor of some other version of metaphysical realism.

⁷ In a passage that has since become famous, Hume advises us as follows: “if we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion” (Hume 1993, p. 114). Though Hume was no doubt being glib, this seems to be a case of what Putnam refers to as the tendency of philosophers who lose sight of the transcendence of reason to slip into cultural imperialism (see Putnam, “Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized” (1983e), p. 235 and pp. 238-240). Positivists did not tend to be any more charitable than Hume, though they never, to my knowledge, advocated book burning.

and had its smouldering fire been carefully nursed and developed.”⁸ Kant recognized that what Hume had done was to demonstrate that Cartesian “secure” metaphysics was, in fact, no more secure than Scholastic metaphysics, and therefore could only be speculative, which is to say worthless. He believed, however, that this put him in a position to establish, once and for all, a truly secure metaphysics, to succeed where Descartes had failed – to bring about a reformation of philosophy by ridding it of speculative metaphysics, and by finally founding metaphysics as a science. In this, Kant was carrying on the positivistic tradition handed down from Descartes.

Descartes had, in effect, proposed a new standard for every fledgling epistemology to meet, and, until fairly recently,⁹ this standard had been acknowledged by Western philosophers as naturally and properly suited to the epistemological enterprise in general. Descartes’ standard is: epistemology, as the science of human knowledge, must be secure – that is, it must derive its force ultimately from premises that are logically rigorous and rationally indubitable – otherwise, it can have no authority. Descartes certainly was not the first epistemologist, or the first philosopher, to propose epistemological standards (either for what was required for a single belief to count as knowledge, or for what was required for an epistemological theory to count as minimally acceptable), but he is regarded as the originator of modern epistemology because it was

⁸ Kant 2001, pp. 6 and 2.

⁹ This standard has largely been abandoned, or is in the process of being abandoned, across all or nearly all philosophical disciplines. There is now widespread conviction that the search for transhistorically and transculturally certain foundations was naïve and hopeless from the outset. Of course, it is almost not worth pointing out that this position – in insisting upon the *hopelessness* of discovering secure metaphysical foundations for our epistemology – requires heavy metaphysical assumptions of its own, to the effect that there *are no* transhistorical or transcultural truths, or none of which we can be aware. In any event, this conviction seems to me generally to be grounded either (1) on some version or other of political or ethical pluralism, in which case it is simply a non sequitur (since I take it for granted that no epistemological consequences follow from our political or ethical commitments as such), or (2) on neo-pragmatism, in which case it is mistaken, as I shall argue in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

Descartes who, in implicitly distinguishing secure from speculative metaphysics, launched the modern epistemological project of discovering a secure metaphysical basis for our epistemology – that is, an irrefutable metaphysical account of what makes it possible for us to have any knowledge of the world outside our minds, and of how we acquire such knowledge. This is precisely what is now meant, thanks to Kant, by a “critical” project, or a “critique”: namely, an attempt to provide an account of what makes something possible, in order to pave the way to explaining how and why it is actual. Kant was attempting to meet Descartes’ standard, but knew that Descartes’ metaphysics could not do so. Consequently, he concluded that metaphysics needed to be reformed once again.

Kant began, as he himself notes, by applying Hume’s conclusion about causation to our other ideas that are supposed to be *a priori*, such as space, time, and number, and found that in each case they are such as to be incapable of arising through empirical observation alone, but are nevertheless indispensable to reasoning. Indeed, Kant claims, what he discovered was that these *a priori* ideas are the forms taken (or taken on) by all of our experience – the very conditions of experience, or (Kant postulated) of our having experience at all. This was the secure metaphysics Kant was looking for: metaphysics was now to be conceived as a science of concepts – the conceptual apparatus of pure reason. It would be *a priori* because it was, as it were, built in to all experience simply in virtue of its being experience at all; it would necessarily precede experience because it formed the outer limits of experience for us as experiencing beings. It would be secure because it was the *only* form in which *we* could have experiences, and was what explained the possibility of our experience.

There are, however, three serious, and related, problems with Kant's metaphysics. Firstly, by reconstruing metaphysics as a science of concepts, Kant broke with the traditional philosophical usage of "*a priori*" to refer to information we possess *about the world* in advance of experience of it. For Kant, *a priori* truths were truths about the structure of pure cognition, not truths about the world. On this view, *a priori* knowledge becomes analytic knowledge about the necessary structure of experience and about the propositions that express the facts about this structure, thus paving the way for the reduction of traditional epistemology to theories of reference that was distinctive of the Linguistic Turn. Secondly, his metaphysics involves the claim that the world comes to us filtered through our forms of sensible intuition, one consequence of which is that we cannot know whether our concepts "hook on" to the world (for all the reasons given above), or what the world is in fact like outside of our experience of it. This, however, invites the objection that we really have no grounds for talking about "the world" as such, or about "the world" as the *cause* of our experience, and, thus, no grounds for saying that we can really say anything about "the world" itself at all. As a result, Kant's attempted rescue and reform of metaphysics turns out, like Descartes', to collapse into speculation. Thirdly, as should by now be clear, Kant's epistemology was representationalism without the representation-relation. Kant largely preserved the pluralistic metaphysical schema of representationalism, and merely replaced representation with "filtering"; our ideas "of" objects, or "of" the world, capture how the world appears *to us*, as filtered through our sensory and cognitive apparatus; this is Kant's famous transcendental idealism. Kant did not so much replace representationalism as modify it. It was a breathtakingly ingenious modification, to be sure, but it was a modification nonetheless.

A. J. Ayer, like Descartes and Kant before him, felt the need for reform, and proposed again to reform philosophy by eliminating speculative metaphysics. Unlike Descartes and Kant, however, rather than attempting to replace speculative metaphysics with a secure metaphysics, Ayer intended to replace speculative metaphysics with nothing at all. The epistemological work that metaphysics had formerly been called upon to do – the explanation of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge – could now be done, according to Ayer and other positivists, by the notion of analyticity, entirely within the confines of (natural or artificial) language alone. What appeared to be *a priori* awareness of certain necessary truths about the world (such as mathematical truths) could be understood, and accounted for, as intralinguistic or intrasystemic *definitions*; they are necessarily true because we do not allow them to be false¹⁰ – we would sooner reinterpret our physical theories than allow experimental evidence to overturn an analytic (mathematical or logical) statement.¹¹ In other words, their being necessarily true is strictly a matter of convention.

The revolution in philosophy that had begun with Descartes' attempt to reform metaphysics had ended with the empiricist revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and with the Linguistic Turn; in short, it had ended with the rejection of metaphysics as a philosophical enterprise concerned with understanding the nature and structure of the world as it is in itself, and with its expulsion from philosophy.¹² Like

¹⁰ And because they form a consistent system, do not contradict one another, are the most basic statements of their kind, and so on.

¹¹ Ayer 1952, pp. 76-77.

¹² Of course positivism is now defunct, and metaphysics has made something of a wary and defensive return to philosophy, but metaphysics in the analytic mode is, by and large, not a resumption of traditional metaphysics, as I shall argue in Chapter Eight, and only a handful of philosophers today carry on the tradition. Nowadays, philosophers of all sorts either propose that we go on without traditional metaphysics, or they try silently to put this advice into practice, by conducting themselves as if traditional metaphysical considerations were superfluous. John Rawls has famously remarked that his theory of justice is not a

Descartes and Kant, however, positivists sought a method that would enable philosophers to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate bases for belief, and that would prepare legitimately grounded beliefs for certification, thus establishing with certainty our knowledge of the world. They sought a means of grounding our entire epistemological enterprise, and they believed that they had identified the ground: by construing objects as groups of sensory stimulations, and reports of these stimulations as observation statements, the entirety of our empirical knowledge (which is to say, the entirety of our knowledge) could then be grounded upon our sensory stimulations coupled with our linguistic conventions. The only question that remains is how we are to distinguish observation statements (or statements of fact) from analytic statements on the one hand, and nonsense on the other; after all, some statements that looked like factual statements or analytic statements were in fact neither, but were illegitimate metaphysical assertions. Positivists had the answer to this too: in order for a statement to be meaningful, it had to be verifiable, which is to say that it had to be confirmable or (in Quine's phraseology) infirmable by experience.

The chief problem with the criterion of verification, however, was that, in order for it to count as part of the apparatus of positivistic epistemology, it would have to be

metaphysical theory but a political one, and he suggests that "the justification of a conception of justice is a practical social task rather than an epistemological or metaphysical problem." He further adds that his conception of justice as fairness "presents itself not as a conception of justice that is true, but one that can serve as a basis of informed and willing political agreement between citizens viewed as free and equal persons." (See Rawls 1985, p. 224 (n.2), and p. 230.) Kai Nielsen has proposed "setting aside the ontotheological tradition of philosophy, the grand old tradition of philosophy," and pursuing philosophy "within the limits of wide reflective equilibrium alone." (See Nielsen 1994, p. 3.) Nelson Goodman sees himself "at odds with rationalism and empiricism alike, with materialism and idealism and dualism, with essentialism and existentialism, with mechanism and vitalism, with mysticism and scientism, and with most other ardent doctrines," and claims that there is no way of saying what reality is like "apart from all frames [of reference]." (See Goodman 1978, p. x and p. 3.) Bas C. van Fraassen advocates a thoroughgoing instrumentalism about scientific theories, and insists that such an account of science must "involve throughout a resolute rejection of the demand for an explanation of the regularities in the observable course

construed as a statement either of a matter of fact or of an analytic truth, but the statement was neither verifiable itself on the basis of observation or experience, nor true by definition (analytic). What was ultimately worse for positivism than the unverifiability of the verification principle, however, was Quine's discovery that the notion of analyticity just could not be made to work within the confines of a strictly empiricist epistemology, which meant that there could be no hope for differentiating analytic statements from statements of matters of fact, and thus no hope for positivistic epistemology.

After the demise of positivism, "analytic" philosophy went off in two different directions: neo-pragmatism, which has two branches – the internalist/holist camp (inspired by Quine), and the linguistic analysis/philosophy-as-therapy camp (inspired by Austin and Wittgenstein, respectively) – and scientific realism. Although the positivists' notion of analyticity had been repudiated, neo-pragmatic "analytic" philosophers went on treating ideas as linguistic items, since this (supposedly) did not require adopting any metaphysical assumptions or postulates concerning the relationship between the mind and the world "in itself." That is, neo-pragmatists remained committed to empiricism, in spite of the defeat of positivism, because representationalism and metaphysics seemed to have perished once and for all, with the last of the positivists. The subject matter of philosophy has been taken by neo-pragmatists to be linguistic (and second-order – about language or concepts, and not about the world) ever since. As Quine put the matter in "Epistemology Naturalized:" "Surely Hume ... would have used contextual definition with pleasure if [he] had thought of it."¹³ The important thing to notice, for our purposes,

of nature, by means of truths involving a reality beyond what is actual and observable, as a demand which plays no role in the scientific enterprise." (See van Fraassen 1980, p. 203.) I could go on.

¹³ Quine 1985, p. 18. I tend to think, as Quine apparently does not, that it is quite significant that Hume did *not* think of it, and nor did any philosopher in the history of the discipline, principally because they

however, is that the neo-pragmatists' rejection of metaphysics was a result of the retention by the epistemological tradition of representationalism as the epistemology of choice.

In spite of Hume and neo-pragmatism, scientific realists adopted representationalism as their epistemology, but, rather than offering a secure metaphysics to support it, they opted for an inductive stance: realism about the objects of science, and representationalism as an account of our knowledge of these objects, provides us with the best explanation of the success of the scientific enterprise. Consider the following from Hilary Putnam:¹⁴

It is beyond question that scientists use terms as if the associated criteria were not *necessary and sufficient conditions*, but rather *approximately* correct characterizations of some world of theory-independent entities, and that they talk as if later theories in a mature science were, in general, *better* descriptions of the *same* entities that earlier theories referred to. In my opinion, the hypothesis that this is *right* is the only hypothesis that can account for the communicability of scientific results, the closure of acceptable scientific theories under first-order logic, and many other features of the scientific method.¹⁵

This position has provoked scads of replies, from Bas van Fraassen's "adequacy" theory¹⁶ to Latour and Woolgar's inscriptionism.¹⁷ Of course, scientific realism has also attracted the replies and scorn of other neo-pragmatists, most notably those neo-

virtually all shared the same conviction: that the subject matter of philosophy is the nature of reality. Perhaps the most important consequence of the view that the subject matter of philosophy is linguistic is the view that ideas and concepts are linguistic, and that, therefore, our experience of the world takes place in and through language. This view is unquestionably false (see, for instance, Laurence Bonjour's "Analytic Philosophy and the Nature of Thought," (forthcoming), and Bryan Magee's (1999) *Confessions of a Philosopher*, chapter 5), but what should here be noted is that it relies, ultimately, on the defeat of representationalism and the rejection of metaphysics.

¹⁴ Prior to his conversion to internal realism.

¹⁵ Putnam 1975, p. 237.

¹⁶ See van Fraassen, 1980.

¹⁷ See Latour and Woolgar, 1979.

pragmatists who formerly identified themselves as scientific realists but have since jumped ship – such as Putnam himself, and Nelson Goodman – which is, incidentally, a common occurrence. Putnam’s replies tend to the global, and generally attack scientific realism at the point of its fondest epistemological aspirations. Putnam has pointed out, quite rightly, that the representation-relation scientific realists depend upon, and hope will one day be “worked out,” can never be worked out from within the confines of an empiricist programme, since any such “working out” of the representation-relation would simply involve more concepts (more linguistic items) – in other words, boot-strapping.¹⁸ Neo-pragmatists tend exasperatedly to insinuate that scientific realists, as heirs of positivism, do not seem to have learned anything from its downfall.

All of this has left the traditional epistemological project of modern Western philosophy with the following two choices, both empiricist: (1) either our epistemology has, and can have, no possible foundation, and any talk of the “fit” between our conceptual scheme and reality itself is just hopeless pining for a “God’s eye view” that we can never have; or (2) our best hope lies in the continued success of science, and of intertheoretic reduction, which increases the likelihood that scientific realism will be accepted as the best explanation of the success of science. The question is, why be an empiricist? What apparently makes rationalism so implausible is that its flagship epistemology, representationalism, was demolished over two hundred years ago. This does tend to make scientific realists look not only quaint, but a bit daft. The rejection of metaphysics, however, that began with Descartes’ rejection of speculative metaphysics and ended with positivism’s repudiation of all metaphysics as speculative, depends upon the prominence, and ultimately the failure, of representationalism. In the following

¹⁸ Putnam 1983, pp. 17-18.

chapters, I shall argue that the relatively recent repudiation of metaphysics in general as a philosophical discipline concerned with the nature of reality itself was and is unjustified and, in any event, unsuccessful anyway, not simply because epistemologies other than representationalism are possible, but because any epistemology that attempts to ground itself so as to meet Descartes' standard (or one like it) requires a corresponding metaphysics, and because every epistemology must meet this sort of standard to count as a minimally acceptable account of knowledge. I shall also argue that neo-pragmatic arguments to the contrary are nothing to the point, because they themselves depend upon the very rejection of metaphysics that I am calling into question. Looking back over the history here traced, we can see that the rejection of metaphysics relies on the retention by the epistemological tradition of the representationalist schema; what must go is representationalism, not metaphysics. I propose a return to metaphysics. If we cannot hope for the secure metaphysics that was the dream of Descartes and Kant, then we must return to speculative metaphysics, if that is the best we can do, because, as I shall argue, philosophy cannot get on without it.

CHAPTER 2

AYER AND CARNAP: THE ELIMINATION OF METAPHYSICS

The history of modern epistemology can, as we have seen, be viewed as a history of repeated attempts at the reformation of philosophy through the elimination of speculative metaphysics, beginning with Descartes' Schoolmen and Scholasticism, and his reformation project. Kant had the natural theologians and the Cartesians to contend with, and British and German proto-positivists had the German idealists (post-Kantians – Hegel, Schelling, Fichte and others).¹ The rejection of speculative metaphysics undertaken both by positivists and neo-pragmatists, then, was not so wholly novel as it may seem. Several successive waves of such rejection had preceded the empiricist revolution of the late nineteenth century. The difference between Descartes and Kant, on the one hand, and both positivists and neo-pragmatists, on the other, however, is that, while Descartes repudiated the metaphysics of his day, and Kant repudiated the metaphysics of his, both Descartes and Kant inaugurated new metaphysical enterprises in an attempt to produce a secure metaphysics, which were then overthrown in their turns, whereas positivists' and neo-pragmatists' stated intentions, though perhaps unfulfilled, were to replace speculative metaphysics with *nothing at all*, other than a new philosophic method. In this sense, at least, positivists and neo-pragmatists have been truly revolutionary in their hopes, if not in the event.

¹ Thus, the history of modern philosophy has been a history of empiricist revolution, even if Descartes and Kant considered themselves, and have since been considered by others to be, rationalists. Their versions of rationalism have, as it were, been emissaries and harbingers of the revolution, by equating epistemology (and rationalism) with the project of accounting for the role of the *a priori* in grounding our *empirical* knowledge, and thus by progressively narrowing the scope of the *a priori* to fit this account. (See, also, BonJour 1999, pp. 20-26.)

Both positivists and neo-pragmatists have claimed that the utterances of metaphysicians are meaningless. Both have claimed that the debates which have so preoccupied metaphysicians in the past are pointless, irresolvable, and ultimately misguided. They have claimed that metaphysics should be, *must* be, overcome, eliminated, purged from the discipline of philosophy, reclassified as poetry or mysticism (or both, or as something far worse and less beautiful and expansive than either), and renounced, in order that we may get on with the serious business of philosophy. They say these things in the spirit of one who has purchased a set of well-used but sturdy tools of the various practical trades, and has found among the lot divining rods, phrenological tables, astrological charts, and crystal balls. The point is simply to clear out the superstitious and impractical clutter, and to eliminate the blunt and clumsy and simply useless implements in favor of the tools that clearly work.

Despite the fact that both positivists and neo-pragmatists say quite similar things about metaphysics and about metaphysicians, however, and despite the fact that they seem to say them for at least some of the same reasons – at least according to the figurative analogy I offered just now – neo-pragmatists and positivists have (in the main) rather different ideas of just what constitutes the serious business of philosophy. Thus, they have also importantly different reasons for rejecting metaphysics and calling for its elimination or excision from philosophy. Positivists were, like Descartes and Kant, hoping to discover the true method in philosophy, the ground of our knowledge of the world, the philosophical threshing basket which will enable us, once and for all, to separate the wheat from the chaff, and they believed that the work of explaining the apparent necessity of some truths formerly assigned to metaphysics could now be

accomplished by logical tools alone. A good deal of what has passed for respectable metaphysics at one time or another has also, of course, appeared to be hogwash by the lights of the succeeding age; as I shall argue in this and the following chapters, however, the positivists' and neo-pragmatists' wholesale rejection of metaphysics was unsuccessful, unjustified, and untenable. As we will see, positivists are committed to a metaphysical doctrine of their own, which positivism should prohibit, and this is a consequence of the indispensability of metaphysics to any comprehensive epistemology.²

* * *

A.J. Ayer identifies as his target the traditional conception of philosophy as a first-order discipline distinct from science – the conception that involves “the thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense.”³ He begins his assault on metaphysics by noting that the problem with transcendental, or what I am calling speculative, metaphysical claims,⁴ is that they would

² An argument quite similar to the one developed in this chapter is developed independently by Michael Williams in his “The Elimination of Metaphysics” (1986) though he arrives at somewhat different conclusions. Clark Glymour also makes an argument to similar effect against Putnam, in his “Conceptual Scheming” (1982), but the general line of argument, similar to the one I develop here, can be equally well applied to Ayer’s position in *Language, Truth and Logic* or, for that matter, to Quine’s position in “The Limits of Knowledge” (1976a).

³ Ayer 1952, p. 38. In other words, metaphysics, broadly construed.

⁴ According to Ayer, and to positivists generally, all metaphysical claims are speculative, because, according to positivism, there can be no secure metaphysics – unless, of course, we accept the Kantian psychologistic deflation of the content and work of metaphysics; that is, unless we take the development of a theory of pure cognition, or later, of an ideal language, to *be* metaphysics. I suppose that I cannot really object if someone chooses to use the word in this way, but, as I have already noted in Chapter One, such usage is not consistent with the traditional philosophical usage of “metaphysics” to refer to the study of the nature of reality itself beyond direct experience. Moreover, I would, in a Kripkean move, be willing to let the positivists have the term “metaphysics” to refer to the development of an ideal language or whatever, but I would coin the term “schmetaphysics” to refer to the study of the nature of reality beyond direct experience, and argue that it should be clear that (1) metaphysics in the positivists’ sense is not schmetaphysics, and (2) positivists do not (intentionally) do schmetaphysics at all.

appear to have no basis in experience. Ayer observes that we might ask the metaphysicians for an account of the source of their premises, on the basis of which they supports their metaphysical hypotheses:

Must [the metaphysician] not begin, as other men do, with the evidence of his senses? And if so, what valid processes of reasoning can possibly lead him to the conception of a transcendent reality? Surely from empirical premises nothing whatsoever concerning the properties, or even the existence, of anything super-empirical can legitimately be inferred.⁵

Lest any questions should already seem to have been begged against the metaphysician, Ayer is prepared to acknowledge the claim on the part of the metaphysician to *a priori* awareness that would provide the requisite support for her metaphysics. Thus, Ayer concludes, “one cannot overthrow a system of transcendent metaphysics merely by criticizing the way it comes into being. What is required is rather a criticism of the nature of the actual statements which comprise it,” presumably, in order to show that they can have no conceivable meaning.⁶ Ayer is prepared with just such a criticism: “Our charge against the metaphysician is not that he attempts to employ the understanding in a field where it cannot profitably venture, but that he produces sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant.”⁷ What is the criterion of literal significance? The criterion of verifiability. This criterion states that a sentence is literally meaningful if, and only if, the speaker of the sentence can identify what observation or set of observations would lead her to accept the sentence, and what observation or set of observations would lead her to reject it. Following the criterion, we

⁵ Ayer 1952, p. 33.

⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

can see that a sentence such as “the Absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress” is unverifiable, and thus meaningless.⁸

Sentences such as “unicorns are fictitious,” however, might at first appear to pose a problem for the criterion, inasmuch as such a sentence seems to express a truth in a way that the sentence involving “the Absolute” does not, since the conventions of quantificational logic, which call for existential generalization over such sentences, would require us to infer that (1) unicorns exist, and that (2) unicorns are a sort of existent entity called “fictions.” Clearly this is not the proper conclusion. Thus, what is wanted is an analysis of the logic of the sentence that reduces the apparent referring term “unicorn” and the apparent predicate “fictitious” to circumlocutions which would enable us to avoid conclusions (1) and (2) above, while preserving the conventions of quantificational logic. Metaphysicians, Ayer suggests, are often bewitched into thinking that there are such things as substances by the structure of language, in more or less the way that a straightforward reading of “unicorns are fictitious” according to the principles of quantificational logic would yield conclusions (1) and (2). Philosophers who, Ayer says, are “infected by the primitive assumption that to every name a single real entity must correspond,” are misled by the further assumption that we must draw a sharp distinction between a thing and its attributes.⁹ In calling the thing-in-itself a “substance,” such philosophers are then forced to the illegitimate and unintended metaphysical conclusion that there is such a thing as substance as a feature of reality in itself. Thus are many philosophers ineluctably led to make metaphysical assertions without intending to be metaphysicians (but only, presumably, by meaning to talk about certain sensible

⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

entities). There remains, then, the correction of these metaphysical errors which result from seemingly innocuous assumptions about language and its use, and the correction of these errors by way of the production of sentential or linguistic analyses will constitute an important part of the business of philosophy, inasmuch as philosophy will be charged with the refinement of the ideal language of scientific discourse.

Now it is not my intention to defend such statements as “the Absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress.” However, we must be clear about what warrants us in using the criterion of verifiability to rule it out as meaningless. Perhaps the most famous objection to the criterion of verifiability – which I will henceforward refer to as the principle of verification or as the verification principle – is that it is itself a sentence which purports to be meaningful and which purports to set the standard for meaningful utterance, but that it does not satisfy itself, since it is not empirically verifiable.

It is not clear, however, that this is the case. The claim that a statement is meaningful if, and only if, its speaker can identify those observations that would lead her to accept the statement, and those observations that would lead her to reject it, can be verified (if any statement can be verified at all) by investigating whether in fact speakers treat statements as meaningful if, and only if, they can identify those observations that would lead them to accept those statements, and those observations that would lead them to reject them. The problem is not that the verification principle is not itself verifiable, it is that positivists did not intend the principle as itself an empirical generalization that would stand or fall on the results of empirical research. They intended it to apply to all utterance *in advance of investigation into the practices of speakers*. One of the

consequences of accepting the principle, however, is that the only statements that are meaningful and can be known to be true in advance of any investigation are *analytic*, or true in virtue of the meanings of their terms alone (i.e., tautological). The verification principle is not, however, analytic, so it must be an empirical generalization. Some positivists were prepared to accept this consequence until it was realized¹⁰ that no statement can be verified – that is, established or confirmed to be true – empirically; statements can only be more or less well confirmed by the sum total of past experience. What this means, however, is that empiricism can only be more or less well supported by experience, according to its own standards. It cannot be established by experience, or by reason alone. Thus, the criterion would seem to be without support, merely a piece of positivist dogma.

This provoked two different reactions among positivists: certain positivists acceded to the charge of dogmatism, but attempted to mitigate the damage by claiming a more limited scope for the principle; others refused to be called dogmatists, and insisted that the principle which establishes the criterion for meaningful utterance cannot itself be held to this criterion. However, it is not altogether clear why the principle should be accorded such a status. Even if it could be counted among the conventions of our language, we would then be forced to regard it as analytic, which it clearly is not, and which would render it silent on matters of fact, such as which statements are meaningful and which are not, which would amount to suicide for positivism.¹¹

¹⁰ Perhaps it would be better to say “until it was remembered,” since Hume had already made the point.

¹¹ I take it for granted that the question of which statements are meaningful and which are meaningless is a matter of *fact* – about the relationship between sentences (or statements or propositions or whatever) and their objects, whatever they are – and cannot simply be “decided” by the adoption of an analytic principle of sentence verification or construction.

It is not that there is no way in which the truth of the statement could be borne out by observation, or sets of observations. Rather, the principle is supposed to state the criterion for the meaningfulness of statements, thus, the judgment that the principle itself is meaningful or meaningless *would already have to assume the principle (or some other such principle) in the first place*. We would thus need either another principle (in which case it is not clear why we even need the verification principle), or a metaverification principle, to which to appeal in such cases, which would claim that “The sentence ‘A sentence is meaningful if, and only if, the speaker of the sentence can identify what observation or set of observations would lead her to accept the sentence, and what observation or set of observations would lead her to reject it’ is meaningful if, and only if ...” and so on up. This, of course, would produce an infinite regress of metaverification principles, which I can only assume would be vicious.

What is even more important to notice, however, about this admittedly shopworn point, is that the verification principle *could not possibly apply to all utterance in advance*. Ayer observes that the criterion of verifiability will require some adjustment if it is to allow for what seem to be perfectly reasonable empirical generalizations (such as “All ravens are black”) which are understood to apply to a potentially infinite number of cases, which would surely transcend the bounds of possible experience. He then modifies the criterion to read: A sentence is meaningful if, and only if, the speaker of the sentence can identify what observation or set of observations would “be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood.”¹² No statement, other than an analytic statement, can be thought to be true come what may, and can be thought to cover a potentially infinite number of cases. The verification principle is, however, supposed to apply to all

sentences – a potentially infinite number of sentences – and to have identified them as meaningless in virtue of certain facts about them that transcends the bounds of possible experience. That is to say, the verification principle must be either analytic or *a priori*. It cannot be analytic if it is to concern matters of fact, but it also cannot be *a priori* by dint of Ayer's empiricism. The only way it could possibly serve as the criterion of meaningful utterance is as a synthetic *a priori* truth about all utterance.¹³ The verification principle itself would then seem to commit the positivist to a metaphysical postulate as unwarranted, by her lights, as any statement involving the Absolute.

Since the verification principle was supposed to justify the positivists' empiricism, this would be admitting that empiricism cannot defend its own conception of philosophy except by subjecting it to empirical confirmation, and thus by begging the question. The principle cannot, of course, establish empiricism, since the principle is itself, at bottom, merely an expression of a commitment to empiricism about meaning and reference.

This result should, naturally, be embarrassing in the extreme for the positivist, and it may seem a bit surprising. I believe, however, that what has happened here can be accounted for as follows. The positivist begins with the assumption that no belief is warranted unless it can be empirically warranted. This assumption, by itself, begs no real questions. It is, of course, perfectly consistent with empiricism in general, and positivism

¹² Ibid., p. 38.

¹³ It could be objected that the verification principle should be understood as a principle of sentence construction, so that what the principle covers is all constructible sentences, recursively defined. Even if we were to grant this construal of the principle, however, it would make no difference, for the following reason: *the principle is a criterion of sentence meaningfulness*. Even if we regard it as a principle of sentence construction, what it says is: "any future constructible sentence, S, will be meaningful if and only if S is constructed so as to be empirically verifiable." The principle cannot say this, even about potentially constructible sentences, without either begging the question against the metaphysician or simply stipulating

is a brand of empiricism. The positivist then introduces the principle of verification, which is intended to adjudicate the meaningfulness of sentences. The principle, however, just embeds the original empiricistic assumption. Non-verifiable statements are then identified as meaningless and banished to the land of wind and ghosts. This is just to draw the net of empiricism over the entirety of discourse, and to forbid by fiat any statement to be meaningful which does not admit of empirical verification or tautological self-evidence. Thus, the positivist has ruled out the possibility that any statement have, as its object, any aspect of reality as such – any facts about reality as it is in itself – which is just to say that the positivist claims to have knowledge of the structure of the entirety of meaningful discourse in advance: that none of it refers to any objects or facts which are not possible objects of sense, and thus that there can *be* no facts about reality as such, since the meaning of a factual statement is simply to be equated with what would be the case if it were true, and since there can be no meaningful statements about reality as such (and since, of course, the ideal language would say everything that can be said about the world).

* * *

As we have seen, however, the verification principle commits the positivist to the very thing which the principle was, in part, designed to criticize and extirpate: speculative metaphysical claims about the mind-independent structure and nature of the world.

Could the positivistic distinction between statements within and without the language of

a definition of “meaningful” that rules out metaphysical assertions. I am grateful to Matt McKeon for raising this objection.

science be understood in such a way as to avoid relying on the principle of verification? That is, could we offer some other reasons for saying that the question of the reality of the total system of entities, or of the “fit” of our conceptual framework with reality in itself are impermissible?

Rudolph Carnap, in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” proposes to do just that. He had, by that time, relinquished his hope of a successful rational reconstruction of our knowledge of the external world – of establishing our knowledge of the world on the basis of a reduction of statements about physical objects to statements about sense data and observation sentences – and had accepted the conclusion that the verification principle cannot be empirically established. He adopted a pragmatic approach to the acceptance of linguistic frameworks in general (including, presumably, the positivistic framework), and argued that positivism simply made the best sense of our total experience.¹⁴ In doing so, he denied the need for our entire epistemological enterprise to be (metaphysically) grounded. Carnap’s distinction between questions that are “internal” to our “thing language” and questions “external” to this framework as a whole presages the neo-pragmatist’s denial, as developed later by Quine and Rorty.

This denial has since been formulated as a refusal to “answer the skeptic;” that is, since it is, presumably, only the skeptic who even thinks to raise the questions of how and whether our entire conceptual (or linguistic, or whatever) framework “fits” or “hooks on

¹⁴ Carnap’s “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” appeared, in fact, nearly simultaneously with Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in which Quine, of course, also advocated a pragmatic approach to revision of our overall belief structure, though not in terms of the acceptance of “linguistic frameworks,” which Quine thought to be too reliant on Carnap’s retention of the troubled analytic-synthetic distinction. It is in this way that pragmatism follows (for committed empiricists) from positivism once the principle of verification is discarded: without the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, no statement can be thought to be immune from revision, and by what other criteria than simplicity, fecundity, breadth, and so forth, are we to decide which revisions are appropriate? All that continued to divide Carnap and

to” or “reflects” reality in itself, the question of the possibility of our epistemology being grounded can be understood as “the skeptical question,” and answers can be understood as offering to “answer the skeptic.”¹⁵ Thus, it has been contended by neo-pragmatists that we need not answer the skeptic. In other words, they have maintained not that the answer to the skeptical question is that our epistemological enterprise cannot be securely metaphysically grounded, but that we cannot ask or answer this question – that the question itself is meaningless, or unanswerable, or misguided, or unintelligible.¹⁶

Positivists and neo-pragmatists both held this position for a variety of reasons, some of which I shall be examining in detail.¹⁷ As I shall argue below, however, any possible reason we could have for refusing to answer the skeptic will require a comprehensive epistemology, and thus will require metaphysical assumptions or assertions or justification.

Quine was Carnap’s retention of the analytic-synthetic distinction, and Quine’s acceptance of Duhemian holism.

¹⁵ This terminological usage has the unfortunate terminological consequence that even those who believe that our entire epistemological enterprise can be securely metaphysically grounded are skeptics, merely for raising the question whether our epistemology can be so grounded, not for the reason that they think that our beliefs about the world ultimately cannot be justified (which was, of course, the earlier usage of “skeptic,” so that to say that one was a skeptic implied that one endorsed a negative answer to what is now known as “the skeptical question”).

¹⁶ Richard Rorty (1979) seems, incredibly, to maintain both, even though it would seem too obvious to need stating that answering the skeptical question in the negative requires metaphysical commitments of a sort that would render any refusal to answer the skeptic otiose. I will deal with Rorty on this subject in Chapter Five.

¹⁷ It may seem that the positivist’s refusal to answer the skeptic is inconsistent with her commitment to grounding our epistemological enterprise. It must be remembered, however, that positivists believed that our epistemological enterprise could be grounded without the need to appeal to a secure metaphysics (or any metaphysics, for that matter), by translating observation statements into reports of sensory stimulations, where physical objects are taken to be groups of these sensory stimulations. This would answer the skeptical question by defusing it. Positivists did not take this construal of the term “physical object” to involve or require any metaphysical assertions about the real (i.e. mind-independent) nature of objects. As we have seen, however, the apparatus required for such a construal itself requires a synthetic *a priori* judgment about the nature of utterance. Carnap’s distinction between “internal” and “external” questions was an attempt to save the positivist’s linguistic reduction of metaphysics to logic by treating objects generally as intrasystemic or intralinguistic posits and treating all talk of objects as part of a non-cognitive adoption of a linguistic framework.

Carnap proposes, among other things, to salve the consciences of those who wish to make use of abstract entities in their philosophical and scientific researches, but who would ordinarily shrink from doing so because of their nominalistic scruples, by assuring them that the question of whether or not to accept the existence of numbers (for instance) is not a matter of positing the existence of any *entities* at all. Rather, the question is, Carnap maintains, a matter of whether or not to accept a system of rules that will govern the use of statements containing number-terms, and this question is to be answered in terms of the utility of this regulative system to our scientific endeavors. That is to say, the question of whether or not to “accept the existence of numbers” is really only the question of whether or not we should adopt (or maintain) “number talk” as part of our apparatus for advancing our knowledge of the world. As part of this apparatus, however, we should not assume that numbers have any separate existence, or that there is really any meaningful sense in which numbers exist *outside* of the system of linguistic rules which govern the use of “number talk.” Of course, this makes the issue of whether numbers exist entirely trivial – numbers exist just in case we utilize a system of rules which govern the use of statements containing number-terms – but this is precisely Carnap’s point; the issue becomes trivial once we arrive at a proper understanding of the nature of questions concerning the existence of some entity or class of entities.

Carnap argues that we cannot meaningfully ask whether the entities or system of entities identified by (or named within, or specified by) our conceptual framework *really* exist(s), as this is an “external question” – a question about our conceptual framework

and its objects *as a whole* – and external questions are “without cognitive content.”¹⁸

Carnap insists that the external question of “the reality of the thing world itself,”

is raised neither by the man in the street nor by scientists, but only by philosophers.¹⁹ Realists give an affirmative answer, subjective idealists a negative one, and the controversy goes on for centuries without ever being solved. And it cannot be solved because it is framed in a wrong way. To be real in the scientific sense²⁰ means to be an element of the system; hence this concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the system itself.²¹

Of the “external” question of whether or not there *really* are numbers – that is, outside of our language of things – Carnap says that “unless and until [the traditional metaphysicians] supply a clear cognitive content” to this question, we “are justified in our suspicion that their question is a pseudo-question, that is, one disguised in the form of a theoretical question while in fact it is non-theoretical.”²² What basis does Carnap have

¹⁸ Carnap 1964, p. 241.

¹⁹ Which means, I suppose, that neither the person in the street nor the scientist is a philosopher. We could, perhaps, take Carnap here to mean that the scientist in her capacity as a scientist is not a philosopher, but then how do we make the required correction for the person in the street? That *in her capacity as a person in the street* she is not a philosopher? Carnap here seems to echo the Wittgensteinian/Austinian conviction that philosophy is a rarefied and highly abnormal activity. Plato also held this view, but only on empirical grounds (most people do not make philosophy their life), not on the theoretical grounds that philosophy is a particular sort of aberrant human activity or a disease that needs to be cured, as did Wittgenstein and Austin. While most people do not make philosophy their life, and do not spend a great deal of their time asking themselves philosophical questions, it is simply false that the person in the street and the scientist are not philosophers in the sense that they do not ask themselves the questions that philosophers do, as can be quite easily empirically confirmed by simply asking the person in the street or the scientist some philosophical questions and noting their replies. One finds that while the average person has few or no opinions about modal logic, she will have quite firm opinions about freedom of the will, for instance, or survival after death, or whether the existence of God can be established by demonstrative proof. Plato’s objection was not to philosophy itself, as was Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s, but to people placing so much more importance on things other than philosophy in their lives. It is not sufficiently frequently noted that Wittgenstein and Austin were both anti-philosophers, and were anti-philosophical and anti-philosophy in their dispositions.

²⁰ We must remember that the question of the grounding of our entire epistemological enterprise is often construed as the grounding of our *scientific* knowledge of the world – that is, our empirical knowledge, or our knowledge of objects – however far that extends. As Descartes put it, he could not have “establish[ed] anything firm and lasting *in the sciences*” if he had not first secured their foundations.

²¹ Carnap 1964, p. 235.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

for saying that questions about our conceptual framework and its objects as a whole can have no cognitive content?

Carnap's view seems to be that to ask such a question is to make a sort of category mistake – to ask of the entire system of entities what we sometimes ask of certain sorts of entities: namely, whether they exist. Carnap maintains that we cannot meaningfully ask this of the entire system.²³ Again, why not? Because to talk of any entities whatever is simply to introduce (or to have introduced, or to utilize) a conceptual or linguistic framework governed by logical rules and “empirical methods” (by which, I think, Carnap means verification).²⁴

Firstly, it is not altogether clear what Carnap means in saying that external questions and metaphysical assertions have no cognitive content. Presumably it would be too strong a formulation of the claim to suppose that it means that such questions are simply nonsensical in both their terminology and their syntax, for, if this is what Carnap intends, he cuts himself off from the possibility of maintaining this position by himself making clear both what is the intended meaning of such questions (namely, that they mean to inquire as to the overall fit between our language of things and the world itself), and why such questions cannot be meaningfully formulated. To a first approximation, one may, perhaps, say that Carnap himself has already specified the cognitive content of external questions for us. After all, in order to formulate the distinction between internal and external questions, we must be clear about which sorts of questions are of which

²³ Ibid. pp. 235 and 245.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 234. I hope that I have here captured some of the flavor of redundancy and circularity that suffuses “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology.” The paper is not, of course, strictly circular in its argumentation, but it seems so largely because Carnap takes the schema of positivism so much for granted that he does not seem to think that he needs to argue for this schema, but merely to expound it. He argues for it, in essence, only when he eventually makes it clear that he thinks that the positivistic framework is the

kind, and we must be able to employ criteria which would enable us to distinguish questions of one type from questions of the other type. Thus, in order to identify a particular question as an external question, we must be able to identify it as inquiring as to the overall fit between our language of things and the world itself. If we can see that external questions have this content, then it cannot be that they have no cognitive content at all.

This is perhaps too easy a victory. In saying that external questions and metaphysical assertions have no cognitive content, Carnap does not, in fact, intend to say that such questions and assertions are meaningless as such. Rather, his point seems to be that there can be no way of determining how external questions (and metaphysical assertions) are to be evaluated or understood, since there are no agreed-upon standards of evidence for settling them. Thus, such questions and assertions are *non-cognitive*, which is to say that nothing that can be said about them can be thought to be rationally evaluated in terms of any available evidence to which all parties can point. Carnap remarks that he

cannot think of any possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant to both [the realist and the nominalist], and therefore, if actually found, would decide the controversy or at least make one of the opposite theses more probable than the other. ... Therefore I feel compelled to regard the external question as a pseudo-question, until both parties to the controversy offer a common interpretation of the question as a cognitive question; this would involve an indication of possible evidence regarded as relevant by both sides.²⁵

one we should adopt, "based upon the content of our experiences" (p. 236). He scarcely argues for this claim, however, but then, how could he?

²⁵ Ibid., p. 246.

This, of course, means that the adoption of any linguistic framework governing the construction of statements about objects is also a non-cognitive matter – it is not a straightforward question of simply weighing the relevant evidence, not “a question simply of yes or no,” but is, as Carnap puts it, “a matter of degree.”²⁶ It is a non-cognitive evaluation or judgment or decision as to the relative simplicity, fecundity, breadth, and so on, of adopting one linguistic framework rather than another.

It is worth noting, to begin with, how significant a concession to the metaphysician Carnap has here been driven to make by the demotion of the verification principle. Presumably there would be nothing to prevent our adoption of a metaphysical realist linguistic framework, if it were judged to be simplest, fecund, sufficiently broad, and so forth, which is to say that such a framework would not be meaningless or nonsensical. In fact, Carnap seems to be saying that a framework becomes meaningful when it is adopted as a means of accounting for the available evidence. Carnap simply wishes to promote the positivist framework as best fitting the pragmatic bill. It is difficult, however, to know how to evaluate his advocacy of positivism, since this advocacy is itself presumably non-cognitive.

Still, though it is non-cognitive, it is presumably not *irrational*. Carnap’s standard for rationality involves the availability of mutually available, mutually relevant evidence. Positivism, he thinks, best fits the available, agreed-upon evidence. A realist about numbers could, however, argue, that she and the nominalist would agree to the following: if it should happen that any attempt to formulate a system of real numbers should result in contradictions, that would make the actual (metaphysical) existence of numbers less probable. The realist and the nominalist could both interpret this as

²⁶ Ibid., p. 247.

potential evidence of the failure of apparent *a priori* awareness (of the existence and nature of numbers, in this case) to provide knowledge of the nature and structure of reality as it is in itself. In that case, however, there is mutually agreed-upon and available evidence to which both the realist and the nominalist can point, that would be relevant to settling their dispute. Carnap would presumably reject the very idea of *a priori* awareness of the nature and structure of mind-independent reality, but then it would seem that his only possible reason for doing so is that he has made the (non-cognitive) choice of a positivistic framework within which *a priori* awareness is impossible. Why make this choice? Carnap pays too high a price for the preservation of the positivists' rejection of metaphysics. By viewing the adoption of any conceptual scheme as non-cognitive, he withdraws whatever support there might have been for the claim that positivism should be preferred to other schemes. If positivism is just one scheme among many, what basis do we have for saying that there is no evidence that could settle metaphysical questions? Carnap's claim that *we cannot say how and whether our language of things "fits" the world as such* is itself a claim about the nature of the relationship of language to the world, in which case it is an *external* claim. Thus, the basis for drawing the distinction between internal and external questions in the first place depends upon a particular (and foregone) answer to a particular external question – namely: What can be said about the relationship between our language of things and the world as such?

The point is this: as soon as one embarks upon the task of distinguishing between meaningful and meaningless statements, or between what is cognitive and non-cognitive, rational and irrational, knowable and unknowable, one must develop criteria which will provide a means of doing the distinguishing, which will require saying something

positive about the content of meaningless expressions. Not only will any attempt to establish a boundary between what can be known and what cannot be known require metaphysical assumptions or assertions, but any attempt to refuse to ground our epistemological enterprise metaphysically will require us to establish such a boundary, which will, in turn, require metaphysical assumptions or assertions. Thus, both the rejection of metaphysics and the rejection of a metaphysical grounding for our epistemological enterprise themselves require epistemological commitments whose support can only be metaphysical.

Anytime we would hope to establish a boundary between what can and cannot be said, or what can and cannot be meaningful, or what can and cannot be known, we are in the business of locating an epistemological frontier beyond which human reason (or reason *simpliciter*) cannot pass. In order for the placement of this frontier not to seem to be simply arbitrary, we must offer reasons for its being just where it is,²⁷ but the only sorts of reasons that could possibly suffice would be metaphysical in nature, since they will ineluctably involve claims that go beyond direct experience (and even all possible experience). After all, they must be able to explain why reason cannot pass beyond this limit, which will involve providing an account not only of why we can say or mean or know what we can, but of why we cannot say or mean or know what we cannot.

Moreover, if the limit is to be an *epistemological* limit, and not merely a pragmatic or psychological one, then providing the sort of explanation just called for will require us to make claims about *all* possible experience, or *all* possible knowledge, or *all* possible meaning, or *all* possible statements, the justification of which claims (if they are

²⁷ Quine would, of course, deny this claim, or at least refuse to be tempted by it (see his “Epistemology Naturalized” (1985)). I will deal with Quine on this matter in Chapter Three.

justified at all) could only be *a priori*. As I shall argue in the chapters that follow, we have no choice but to establish such boundaries, and, thus, no choice but to develop a *comprehensive epistemology*: an epistemological account that attempts to establish a boundary between what can and what cannot be known.

The foregoing was intended as offering a preliminary argument for this conclusion, but we can see that the case can be generalized as follows: to deny either that the skeptical question can be asked or that it can be answered, or even just to claim that this question is nonsensical or unintelligible or beyond our ken, we must be able to offer a *reason* why this is so, and the reason must be capable of showing that the skeptical question is on the far side of a line separating what is askable (or answerable) and what is not. Such a line would constitute an epistemological boundary whose location could only be metaphysically justified.

Of course, to establish the truth of this claim would require, if I am right, a secure metaphysics, and perhaps a transcendental argument – at any rate, something more than what I am prepared to offer here. What I can and will offer, however, is what I take to be a quite strong inductive case to the effect that this claim's being true would go a long way toward explaining the failure of both positivism and neo-pragmatism to successfully escape from or eliminate metaphysics. I have already shown that Ayer and Carnap were unable to do so, and I shall, in the following chapters, show that Quine, Putnam and Rorty fare no better, and for similar reasons.

CHAPTER 3

QUINE'S REJECTION OF THE *A PRIORI*

In *Language, Truth and Logic*, A. J. Ayer emphasizes the extent to which logical positivism is indebted to Hume, and follows Hume, even though the central distinction of logical positivism – between analytic and synthetic statements – had in fact been codified by Kant. Hume refers, of course, to relations of ideas and matters of fact, but this distinction itself did not originate with Hume either, so why then do the positivists father their project so much upon Hume? Hume was the most radical of the modern empiricists, and in advertising their allegiance to Hume, positivists were, no doubt, signaling two things: their determination to follow Russell and Moore in rejecting post-Kantian German Idealism, and their rejection of metaphysics more generally, including Kantian metaphysics. It is true that they owed their formulation of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements to Kant, but they believed that they could put the distinction to a Humean use, and complete the Cartesian epistemological project on empirical grounds alone, without recourse to speculative or critical metaphysics. They needed only (1) to treat the phenomenal world as consisting of sense-data, (2) to treat legitimate statements as either contingent observational reports (reducible to, or translatable as, statements about sense-data) or as necessarily true axioms governing the logic of statement-making, and (3) a means of distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate statements.

Positivists had already begun working to secure themselves against the charge that their means of distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate statements – the criterion of verifiability – was incompatible with (or at least not apparently expressible within)

positivistic empiricism, even before Willard Van Orman Quine asserted that the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements is untenable. As Quine himself points out in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” however (where he makes his now famous argument to this effect), the unverifiability of the verification principle and the untenability of the analytic-synthetic distinction come to much the same thing. The idea that statements could be verified in isolation from other statements depends upon the possibility of reducing observation statements to statements about sense-data (so that the meaning of a statement consists in its verification conditions), and on axiomatic statements to be verified come what may.¹ Since the reduction project is hopeless, no statement can have its meaning in isolation from other statements, and thus no statement can be verified in isolation, or verified come what may.² Quine argues that the analytic-synthetic distinction additionally suffers from the fact that the notion of analyticity is empirically unspecifiable.

Thus, the Cartesian epistemological project, and modern rationalism along with it, would seem to have failed. In fact, this was Quine’s view of things, as he makes plain in his “Epistemology Naturalized”:

Carnap’s constructions, if carried successfully to completion, would have enabled us to translate all sentences about the world into terms of sense data, or observation, plus logic and set theory. But the mere fact that a sentence is *couched* in terms of observation, logic, and set theory does not mean that it can be *proved* from observation sentences by logic and set theory. ... The hopelessness of grounding natural science upon immediate experience in a firmly logical way was acknowledged. The Cartesian quest for certainty had been the remote motivation of epistemology, both on its conceptual and its doctrinal side; but that quest was seen as a lost cause.³

¹ Quine 1980, p. 37-42.

² Ibid.

³ Quine 1985, p. 18.

Quine thus sets about, beginning with “Epistemology Naturalized,” sketching the consequences for the Western epistemological project of the impossibility of translational reduction and of rational reconstruction, and of the consequent collapse of positivism. Quine notes that following the failure of translational reduction, former positivists and others were tempted to despair, and began to consider excising epistemology from philosophy as they (thought they) had excised metaphysics. Quine says that “Carnap and the other logical positivists of the Vienna Circle had already pressed the term ‘metaphysics’ into pejorative use, and the term ‘epistemology’ was next.”⁴ Quine maintains that this attitude is, however, unnecessarily pessimistic. We need not eliminate epistemology as such, but merely eliminate comprehensive epistemology (and thus foundational epistemology). Epistemology can no longer aspire to ground both itself and our knowledge of the external world,⁵ but this does not mean that it is left with nothing to do. Though rational reconstruction is (mostly) out, epistemologists can turn to the evidences of psychology for data on the basis of which to formulate theories of belief-formation.⁶ As we shall see, however, this result depends on the positivistic reduction project being the last best hope for foundational epistemology, which in turn depends upon both the positivists’ rejection of metaphysics and the Kantian psychologistic

⁴ Ibid, p. 23. In fact, Quine sees the collapse of positivism as the impetus behind the Philosophy-as-Therapy movement: “Wittgenstein and his followers, mainly at Oxford, found a residual philosophical vocation in therapy: in curing philosophers of the delusion that there were epistemological problems” (Quine 1985, p. 23). I think he is right about this, as I suggested in the first chapter, but Quine does not, at least in “Epistemology Naturalized,” puzzle much over why Wittgenstein and Austin and so on did not follow him in his naturalistic pragmatism. He seems to think that they just lapsed into unwarranted despondency following the death of positivism, and never recovered. Quine calls this tendency “epistemological nihilism” (Quine 1985, p. 27). He does, however, spend part of the rest of his career defending his version of empiricism against other neo-pragmatists who offer alternative theories of science and scientific progress, such as Kuhn and Feyerabend.

⁵ At least, epistemology can no longer hope to ground itself and our knowledge of the external world on immediate experience and its contents.

reconstruction of the *a priori*.⁷ The support for rationalism collapses with the demise of analyticity only if analyticity is the last possible home of necessary truth. Is it?

It is important to notice that the force of “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” against rationalism (and thus the force of “Epistemology Naturalized,” inasmuch as the arguments of the latter depend upon those of the former) depends entirely on the maintenance within the epistemological tradition of representationalism, and on the Kantian attempt to rescue rationalism and metaphysics by treating *a priori* knowledge as knowledge of the structure of cognition. As I suggested in the first chapter, this way of understanding the *a priori* runs counter to the philosophical tradition, and we should, at the very least, be aware of the fact that it is part of the legacy of representationalism. Other rationalist epistemologies may be possible and defensible. That is to say, Quine’s case in “Two Dogmas” does not tell against rationalism generally, but only against the legacy of Cartesian rationalism as embodied in positivism. Nor does “Two Dogmas” support empiricism against rationalism, except insofar as it contributes to making Quine’s empiricism (and naturalism, and pragmatism) more perspicuous.

These last two claims should not seem so surprising; after all, Quine makes it clear in the course of the article that his aim is to cleanse modern empiricism of its dogmas. Rationalism is his target only insofar as he believes that positivistic empiricism is still infected with traces of rationalism – the “unempirical dogma[s] of empiricists, [their] metaphysical article[s] of faith.”⁸ Moreover, “Two Dogmas” does not offer arguments in favor of empiricism (over against rationalism) because it *assumes*

⁶ Quine 1985, p. 24.

⁷ Discussed in Chapter One.

⁸ Quine 1980, p. 37.

empiricism and labors to preserve it in the face of the collapse of positivism.⁹ Consider: Quine does not argue that there can be no *a priori* awareness of any kind, but only that the notion of analyticity cannot be specified. We could, as was noted above, reject analyticity as does Quine, and still go looking for an alternative rationalist epistemology that would escape the fate of representationalism. Does Quine offer any arguments against rationalism generally, or against the possibility of an alternative foundational epistemology?

Laurence Bonjour, in his *In Defense of Pure Reason*, suggests that the answer to this question is no. He canvasses Quine's major works – those that are generally taken to offer Quine's most developed arguments against rationalism (minimally, against the possibility of *a priori* awareness or knowledge or justification), and he concludes that these works either do not really offer any arguments against the possibility of *a priori* awareness generally, or beg the question against the rationalist.¹⁰ Of "Two Dogmas," Bonjour says, "it reaches the conclusion that there is no *a priori* justification only by adopting a conception of epistemic rationality [namely, holism] that already tacitly assumes this is so."¹¹ Bonjour makes similar remarks concerning Quine's argument from radical translation and Quine's arguments in "Epistemology Naturalized," ultimately turning to more general considerations of his own concerning what he calls "radical empiricism." This is, I believe, unsatisfactory and unacceptable. Surely Quine, the

⁹ "Two Dogmas" argues for empiricism over against rationalism only to the extent that it rejects the lingering rationalism of the positivists as untenable, and its problems as intractable. Of course, if Quine can successfully defend his naturalism, or if this position turns out to be more tenable than every version of rationalism, then obviously rationalism should be rejected. In order to establish this, however, we would need at least an elaboration of Quine's position, and either (1) some arguments against the tenability of rationalism in general, or (2) some arguments to the effect that Quine's position has fewer problems (intractable or otherwise) than every version of rationalism. "Two Dogmas" only provides arguments against one version of rationalism, and part of an elaboration of his position, in outline.

¹⁰ Bonjour 1999, pp. 62-88.

originator of neo-pragmatism and the arch-empiricist of the twentieth century, must have had reasons for accepting empiricism and rejecting rationalism. Surely he must have seen that the collapse of positivism need not have been the end of foundationalism once and for all, and surely he must somewhere offer a more thoroughgoing rejection of rationalism that explains his adherence to empiricism. Surely not all of his best arguments to this effect could simply beg the question or fail truly to address the issue. In fact I believe that we can extract the outlines of such a rejection of rationalism from Quine's work, and, though there are reasons to believe that a wholesale rejection of rationalism is out of the question for Quine, this will provide us with two ways of understanding Quine's legacy in analytic philosophy.

* * *

Quine describes his naturalism as "boiling down to the claim that in our pursuit of truth about the world we cannot do better than our traditional scientific procedure, the hypothetico-deductive method."¹² Another way of putting this would be to say that philosophy, and certainly science, cannot hope for (and should not hope for) an overarching epistemology that would comprehend, in its scope, the general outlines of what grounds any and all knowledge available to any knowing beings of any description. This, Quine suggests, seems like a nice dream, but it is no more than a dream. To think that we could develop such a first philosophy on the basis of which to explain the possibility of science is to think that we could "first fashion a self-sufficient and infallible

¹¹ Ibid., p. 77.

¹² Quine 2004a, p. 281.

lore of sense data, innocent of reference to physical things, and then build our theory of the external world somehow on that finished foundation.”¹³ Presumably one of the questions epistemology wants answered – what is, in fact, probably the central question of all epistemology, and the question that provides it with its primary impetus – is how we human beings can and do know anything. Rather than trying first for an overarching theory that would contain human knowledge (natural science), why not try simply for an account of that knowledge itself, on its own terms? Or, rather, since we have tried, and failed, at the overarching account, why not be content with what we have in the case of ourselves as knowers and believers? That is, why not settle for psychology (as Quine puts the matter in “Epistemology Naturalized”)?

Have we failed, and must we always fail, at the overarching account? Quine clearly thinks so, and with respect to the Cartesian tradition of representationalism that I have been tracing, he seems to be right. I have suggested, and will argue further in later chapters that representationalism is untenable as a foundational epistemology. Descartes set the standard for the modern epistemological project; he simply failed himself to meet it. Of course, so has everyone in the tradition since Descartes first published his *Meditations*. Should we, then, conclude that the standard is unmeetable, revise our standards, and rest content with more modest aspirations? I have been arguing that we should not, and that we should not be tempted to do so on the basis of the failure of the epistemological tradition to deliver a successfully secured foundational epistemology, because that tradition has been systematically engaged in making the same mistake for the past three hundred and fifty years: namely, the mistake of promoting

¹³ Ibid., p. 276.

representationalism. We need, I suggest, a better foundational epistemology. Why does Quine think that no foundational epistemology is called for, or even possible?

Firstly, Quine clearly seems to think that positivism was the last best hope for not merely Cartesian rationalism, but for rationalism (and foundationalism) *simpliciter*. He seems, however, to have and to offer no reasons for thinking so. Even though representationalism collapsed (again) with the defeat of positivism, why not think that we just need a stronger rationalism?¹⁴ Quine does not say. Of course, Quine is an empiricist, but this does not answer the question. Why opt for empiricism over rationalism? Quine is committed to holism, but, again, holism only follows from the failure of positivism if our goal is the preservation of a satisfactory empiricist epistemology. Holism explains the failure of sentences to be verifiable in isolation from other sentences, according to the positivistic criterion of verification, but does so only by way of proposing an alternative empiricistic criterion of verification. Holism does not, strictly speaking, *follow from* the fact that sentences are not empirically verifiable one-by-one; it can play a role in an account of this fact – which is, in fact, the use to which Quine puts it – but it is not a logical consequence.¹⁵ We are, then, still left with the question why Quine seems to think that foundationalism breathed its last with the demise of Carnap's reduction project.

Quine offers a number of tantalizing hints. Quine had, of course, profound respect for Carnap, though it was Quine more than anyone else who was responsible for

¹⁴ As Eliot Sober points out, "it is worth noticing that Quine's advice 'Since Carnap's foundationalism failed, why not settle for psychology' carries weight only to the degree that Carnapian epistemology exhausts the possibilities of epistemology" (Sober 1978, p. 166).

¹⁵ See, especially, "Epistemology Naturalized." Quine observes that "in giving up hope of [reductive] translation, then, the empiricist is conceding that the empirical meanings of typical statements are inaccessible and ineffable. How is this inaccessibility to be explained? Simply on the grounds that the

identifying the fatal flaws in Carnap's reduction program. Indeed, Quine seems to think that it is not merely an understandable, but even a sensible, desire, near to his own heart as an epistemologist, that natural knowledge could be grounded on sensory experience; his "only reservation," he says, "is that I am convinced, regretfully, that it cannot be done."¹⁶ He points out, in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," and again in "Epistemology Naturalized," that Carnap's "treatment of physical objects fell short of reduction not merely through sketchiness, but in principle," and that we "must despair of any such reduction."¹⁷ Still, why think that such a reduction is the only hope for foundational epistemology? "Transcendental argument, or what purports to be first philosophy, tends generally to take on rather [the] status of immanent epistemology insofar as I succeed in making sense of it," Quine remarks.¹⁸ "To account for the external world as a logical construct of sense data—such, in Russell's terms, was the program. It was Carnap, in his *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* of 1928, who came nearest to executing it," but, when his efforts proved unsuccessful, "the Cartesian quest for certainty ... was seen as a lost cause." In other words, Quine does not appear even to consider the possibility of an alternative rationalistic foundational epistemology that could meet Descartes' standard.

Before we chalk this up to a lack of imagination, however, Quine offers two independent lines of argument, both of which are intended to support the conclusion that foundational epistemology is a lost cause. The first line of argument is, I think, not compelling, and is in fact based on a misunderstanding of the Cartesian epistemological project as "immanent epistemology." The second line of argument is stronger, and

experiential implications of a typical statement about bodies are too complex for finite axiomatization, however lengthy? No; I have a different explanation" (Quine 1985, p. 21).

¹⁶ Quine 2004b, p. 247.

¹⁷ Quine 1980, p. 48; Quine 1985, p. 20.

provides us with a clue to understanding both Quine's legacy and the neo-pragmatist's position in rejecting metaphysics and foundational epistemology.

Firstly, Quine suggests that, though “we should like to be able to *translate* science into logic and observation terms and set theory,” there is also something a bit absurd about the whole idea in the first place, since it seems just daffy to think that we could *derive* science from a foundation of sense data.¹⁹ His objection seems to be that science is not now, and never was (or even could have been), in need of a first philosophy to set out its tasks, define its scope and projects, and dictate its content in advance of actual empirical investigation. In “Things and Their Place in Theories,” Quine remarks that “it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described;” and in “Naturalism; or Living Within One's Means,” Quine asserts that “the naturalistic epistemologist dismisses [the] dream of prior sense-datum language, arguing that the positing of physical things is itself our indispensable tool for organizing and remembering what is otherwise, in James' words, a ‘blooming, buzzing confusion.’”²⁰ Quine seems to spell this out most fully in “The Scope and Language of Science,” where he remarks that

It would be unwarranted rationalism to suppose that we can stake out the business of science in advance of pursuing science and arriving at a certain body of scientific theory. Thus consider, for the sake of analogy, the smaller task of staking out the business of chemistry. Having got on with chemistry, we can describe it *ex post facto* as the study of the combining of atoms in molecules. But no such clean-cut delineation of the business of chemistry was possible until that business was already in large measure done.²¹

¹⁸ Quine 2004b, p. 246.

¹⁹ Quine 1985, p. 19.

²⁰ Quine 2004b, p. 246; Quine 2004a p. 276.

²¹ Quine 1976d, pp. 234-5.

Surely, though, the first philosophy (metaphysics) that supports a foundational epistemology does not posit physical entities at all, or any entities of the sort with which science is concerned. If it did, it would not be *first* philosophy. The goal and the work of foundational epistemology is to discover “a foundation for natural science, firmer than science itself,” as Quine himself observes in “Naturalism,” not to stake out the business of science in advance or to posit its objects prior to its going about its job.²² There must be some sort of confusion here.

The confusion seems to me to be this. Quine says, for instance, that “if the epistemologist’s goal is validation of the grounds of empirical science, he defeats his purpose by using psychology or other empirical science in the validation. However, such scruples against circularity have little point once we have stopped dreaming of deducing science from observations.”²³ He likewise speaks of deduction or derivation in other places in “Epistemology Naturalized,”²⁴ as in the following: “It was sad for epistemologists, Hume and others, to have to acquiesce in the impossibility of strictly deriving the science of the external world from sensory evidence.”²⁵ This is putting things backwards. As we have just noted, and as Quine in some places appears to be aware, foundational epistemology is “concerned with the foundations of science,” not with the specific content of science as such. It may seem that foundational epistemology is concerned with the specific content of science, however, if we think of foundational epistemology as consisting in the reduction (or translation) of statements about physical objects to constructions out of sense data. If such a reduction could be carried out,

²² Quine 2004a, p. 281.

²³ Quine 1985, pp. 19.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 21: “The empiricist made one major concession when he despaired of deducing the truths of nature from sensory evidence.”

certain observation statements (and thus scientific theories and laws) would, in fact, be *deducible from* the constructions of sense-data, and thus certain of the contents and objects of science would be likewise deducible. It might even seem that the totality of science could then be deduced from “a self-sufficient and infallible lore of sense data.”²⁶ This, however, is a mistake. Sense data are still *data*; what would be secure and infallible would be the reduction apparatus and the rules governing its use. These would ground our scientific enterprise because they would guarantee that our statements about the world are translatable as descriptions of the relations of its elements, but we would be in exactly the same position as we ever were with respect to its elements: we become aware of them only through experience. Quine’s objection to foundational epistemology on the grounds that science needs no prior philosophy to tell it what to do seems to arise out of his slipping into thinking that the *provability* of the statements of natural science from its foundations implies its *deducibility in advance* from those foundations. This was never either anticipated or hoped-for by foundational epistemologists.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁶ Quine 2004a, p. 276.

²⁷ This might seem an odd thing to say, or it might even seem simply false. Wasn’t it in fact precisely Descartes’ hope for foundationalism that our empirical knowledge be deducible from the epistemic foundations, such that the entire edifice would have the security of demonstrative proof and logical deduction? Yes, indeed, but we must be clear about the sense in which our empirical knowledge is deducible from the foundations. Not even Descartes could seriously have believed that all of our scientific knowledge of the external world could simply *be derived by entailment in advance of actual experience* from its epistemic foundations. Our scientific knowledge could, once it had been gathered, be seen retroductively to be *in principle* deducible from the foundations, but this would not (indeed, could not) make such knowledge available in advance, since it involves an irreducibly contingent element: namely, our experience of the world from our perspective at a specific place and time. The foundations would of course contain, in some sense, all empirical knowledge from the outset, but this does not mean that we would be *aware* at the outset, simply in virtue of being familiar with the foundations, of all of their implications and entailment relations. We are still temporal beings, and must work out these entailments in the fullness of time. Moreover, our epistemic situation is that, short of some leap forward in our cognitive abilities, we must appeal to experience in the process of working out the implications of any metaphysical account of ultimate reality and our relation to it.

Quine's second line of argument against foundational epistemology, however, is more powerful, and more elusive. He says, in "Epistemology Naturalized," that "two cardinal tenets of empiricism [remain] unassailable ... One is that whatever evidence there *is* for science *is* sensory evidence. The other, to which I shall recur, is that all inculcation of meanings of words must rely ultimately on sensory evidence." The first of these tenets seems to me indeed unassailable if it is to be understood as claiming that the only evidence there is for *specific scientific claims* is sensory evidence, but false if it is to be understood as claiming that the only evidence there is for the truth of scientific claims *qua* scientific claims is sensory evidence. I take it, however, that Quine intends the first reading (although he would probably endorse both), so I will let this be. The second tenet, however, I find neither unassailable nor even very well supported anywhere in Quine's work. It is true that Quine goes to great lengths to work out a consistent and comprehensive behavioristic theory of language acquisition and use, but he nowhere appears to argue directly and explicitly against the possibility of *a priori* awareness, knowledge, or justification, which, if possible, could serve as a non-sensory source of word meaning and conceptual content. The final two sections of "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" would appear to be the likely candidates for the locus of Quine's arguments to this effect, but as I noted earlier, Quine's target in those two sections is the possibility of a statement's being true, come what may, in virtue of its being analytic, where this notion is explicitly an artifact of positivism, by way of Kant. Moreover, while Quine offers holism as an account of the meaning of the statements of science, he clearly *assumes* an empirical attitude toward both meanings and language use, and does not

argue for it.²⁸ What, then, does Quine have to say in support of his claim that “*all* inculcation of meanings of words must rely ultimately on sensory evidence?”

In “Posits and Reality,” Quine asserts that “society teaches us our physicalistic language by training us to associate various physicalistic sentences directly, in multifarious ways, with irritations of our sensory surfaces, and by training us also to associate various such sentences with one another.”²⁹ Again, in “On Mental Entities,” he says that “we get the system [of science], in its main lines, from our forebears. As children learning the language, we get on to various simple terms and key phrases by direct association with appropriate experiences.”³⁰ In “Things and Their Place in Theories,” he says that “our talk of external things, our very notion of things, is just a conceptual apparatus that helps us to foresee and control the triggering of our sensory receptors in the light of previous triggering of our sensory receptors. The triggering is, first and last, all we have to go on,” also, “there is no extrasensory perception.”³¹ Moreover, in “The Scope and Language of Science,” Quine remarks that “we cannot significantly question the reality of the external world, or deny that there is evidence of external objects in the testimony of our senses; for to do so is simply to dissociate the terms ‘reality’ and ‘evidence’ from the very applications which originally did most to invest those terms with whatever intelligibility they may have for us.”³²

²⁸ Quine says, simply, that “once the theory of meaning is sharply separated from the theory of reference, it is a short step to recognizing as the primary business of the theory of meaning simply the synonymy of linguistic forms and the analyticity of statements; meanings themselves, as obscure intermediary entities, may well be abandoned” (Quine 1980, p. 22). Well, yes, if one already expects to be able to get a complete and satisfactory theory of meaning on minimalist empiricist grounds. The question is not whether such grounds are possible, available, or good, the question is whether Quine *argues* for an empiricist approach. He does not.

²⁹ Quine 1976c, p. 253.

³⁰ Quine 1976b, p. 222.

³¹ Quine 2004b, p. 229.

³² Quine 1976d, p. 229.

These, however, are not arguments. Even a persuasive defense of behaviorism about language acquisition and language use would offer at best a negative case against the possibility of *a priori* awareness – by suggesting that language acquisition and use can be accounted for entirely without the need to appeal to *a priori* awareness. Lacking a complete account of language acquisition and use, however, does Quine offer any positive arguments against the possibility of *a priori* awareness? He does, but we will need to elaborate them a bit.

In “Things and Their Place in Theories,” Quine suggests that it is a “confusion” to think that “we can stand aloof and recognize all the alternative ontologies as true in their several ways ... We must speak from within a theory, albeit any of various.”³³ One is reminded of Carnap, and of his distinction between legitimate “internal” questions and illegitimate “external” questions. Quine, however, rejects the basis upon which Carnap grounds this distinction.³⁴ What basis, then, does Quine have for making this claim? What prevents us from having any awareness that transcends our theory of the world (or our conceptual scheme, or whatever) as expressed in statements whose content is “first and last” determined by our sensory experience alone?

In “The Limits of Knowledge,” Quine considers the question whether there are things that humankind can never know, whether there are any limits to human knowledge. He begins by rephrasing the question. Surely, he notes, there are things we *will* never know, such as how many automobiles will have entered our city between now and midnight tonight, but this is not the issue. For one thing, this is something we *could* know if we took the trouble to investigate (we could arrange a stake-out), and for another

³³ Quine 2004b, p. 246.

³⁴ As he makes plain in “Ontological Relativity,” (Quine 1999) pp. 54-55.

thing, surely the question is not whether there are things we could know but won't, but whether there are things we could not know at all. Secondly, Quine suggests that the question cannot rightly be whether there are *things* we could not know at all, since things are neither the sorts of things we know (propositionally, as it were), nor again quite to the point of the question. Of course there are things – stars on the far side of our galaxy – that we may never encounter, but again, we could in principle encounter these things under suitable conditions. Thus, the question, according to Quine, is: are there questions that we could never, in principle, answer?

His reply to this question, incredibly, is no. This is not, however, because he believes that our intellect is so powerful as assuredly to be capable of encompassing everything there is (or could possibly be) in its grasp, nor because he believes that we know already everything there is to know, or know more or less what knowing everything will be like. Quine does not believe that it makes any sense to talk about reality beyond the bounds of our language for navigating it, so he thinks that there are no questions that we in principle could not answer because any question that we in principle could not answer would be a question that we in principle could not ask.

[T]here is a reluctance to assign meaning to strictly unanswerable questions. Questions, let us remember, are in language. ... If a question could in principle never be answered, then, one feels that language has gone wrong; language has parted its moorings, and the question has no meaning.³⁵

Again, Quine says,

We have to work within some conceptual scheme or other; we can switch schemes, but we cannot stand apart from all of them. It is meaningless, while working within a

³⁵ Quine 1976a, p. 67.

theory, to question the reality of its objects or the truth of its laws, unless in so doing we are thinking of abandoning the theory and adopting another.³⁶

The bounds of meaning, then, according to Quine, as well as the bounds of knowledge and awareness, are the bounds of language. Have we finally got an argument against the possibility of *a priori* awareness or knowledge – awareness or knowledge that would transcend our conceptual scheme and certify its accuracy with respect to reality itself? Not quite. Since Quine's view of language acquisition and use is wholly empiricist, then to say that the bounds of awareness, knowledge, meaning and intelligibility are the bounds of language is just as much as to reiterate his commitment to empiricism about meaning, which would simply beg the question against the foundational epistemologist and the rationalist. To what else might Quine appeal in order to claim that the bounds of meaning, intelligibility and awareness are the bounds of language (where the meanings of words are given empirically)? The only way in which Quine can draw the limit of our knowledge at the edge of our (empirical) use of language would be for him to claim that there can be no possible conceptual scheme in which language acquisition and use proceeds along rationalist, as well as empiricist, lines. In short, he would have to claim that *a priori* awareness is not, and cannot be, a feature of any conceptual scheme whatever. Since, however, such a claim would itself cover and transcend what are, no doubt, an infinite (or at least indefinitely large) number of conceptual schemes, this claim would itself be an example of the very sort of *a priori* awareness the argument was meant to disallow.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

* * *

Have I, then, convicted Quine of the same mistake I accuse the positivists of having made – that in attempting to eliminate metaphysics they will inevitably need to appeal to a metaphysical postulate which supports limiting our knowledge so as to place metaphysics forever off limits? Quine does not believe that it makes sense to speak of reality as such, apart from theories, so for him to offer a *transcendental* argument against the tenability of rationalism or the possibility of *a priori* knowledge would be worse than self-vitiating, it would be inconsistent with his commitment to naturalism, and would in fact render his naturalism incoherent. Quine asks of his own position, in “Naturalism; or, Living Within One’s Means,” what his naturalism really rules out. He makes it clear that his naturalism involves the “abandonment of the goal of a first philosophy, prior to science,” but does he rule out first philosophy?³⁷

Descartes’ dualism between mind and body is called metaphysics, but it could as well be reckoned as science, however false. ... If I saw indirect explanatory benefit in positing sensibilia, possibilia, spirits, a Creator, I would joyfully accord them scientific status too, on a par with such avowedly scientific posits as quarks and black holes. What, then, *have* I banned under the name of prior philosophy?³⁸

Quine does not answer the question directly, but in refusing to do so, he makes it clear what he thinks his naturalism is about. It is, in the end, about the blurring of boundaries, among other things, so he is hardly one to say in advance what is permissible and what is impermissible.

³⁷ Quine 2004a, p. 275.

³⁸ Ibid., italics added.

Demarcation is not my purpose. My point in the characterizations of naturalism that I quoted is just that the most we can reasonably seek in support of an inventory and description of reality is testability of its observable consequences in the time-honored hypothetico-deductive way—whereof more anon. *Naturalism need not cast aspersions on irresponsible metaphysics*, however deserved, much less on soft sciences or on the speculative reaches of the hard ones, except insofar as a firmer basis is claimed for them than the experimental method itself.³⁹

Now what justifies this concluding caveat? We have seen that it would be inconsistent for Quine to reject rationalism outright, but this is as much as to say that it would be inconsistent for him to reject foundational epistemology – and the first philosophy that goes with it – as well. This is a significant concession, because it means that Quine (and neo-pragmatists generally) can have no basis for rejecting metaphysical claims out of hand, and cannot simply insist that every theory must submit itself to trial under the experimental method, since the question whether sensory awareness is our only awareness is precisely what is at issue, and since the experimental method tacitly assumes that sensory awareness is our only awareness. That is, to insist upon the experimental method as the means of testing every theory is simply to beg the question against the rationalist, since the experimental method is itself part of the apparatus of empiricist epistemology. This also means that Quine and other neo-pragmatists cannot consistently treat metaphysics or metaphysical questions or claims as meaningless, since they cannot consistently offer a reason why the sort of awareness that would support such claims is off limits. As I suggested in the last chapter, if we are going to claim that certain sorts of statements are unintelligible or meaningless, we must at least be able to offer reasons why this is so. My claim is that these reasons can only be metaphysical, but it is enough for the moment to note that Quine can neither rule out metaphysics in the way he hopes,

³⁹ Ibid., p. 276, italics added.

nor offer any reasons why it must be ruled out. It should, I would hope, seem very disappointing to be told that we cannot transcend the bounds of our language, whose inputs are wholly sensory, but that we cannot say why this is so. In the end, Quine leaves us with the insistence that natural science is the *best* we can do, while, in taking this position, he cuts himself off from any possibility of providing a rationale for this limitation. Quine offers, of course, reasons for thinking that we need not appeal to *a priori* awareness in order to explain any of our knowledge, the success of science, or the possibility of science, in the form of his attempts to explain all of this through his naturalism and empiricism alone. I shall consider these attempts in later chapters, but note that Quine must meet the rationalist on level ground; neo-pragmatists cannot scruple to dismiss rationalism because of its commitment to metaphysical realism. We shall see, in fact, that theory choice in epistemology must be driven by both *a posteriori* sensory evidence and *a priori* principles – as ever.

CHAPTER 4

PUTNAM ON DIRECT REFERENCE AND CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

Scientific realism is a version of metaphysical or external realism that adheres to representationalism as its epistemology of choice, but despairs of establishing the accuracy of its epistemology on the basis of a secure metaphysics. Descartes believed, of course, that he could deductively demonstrate the existence of God, and that certain facts about God's nature certified representationalism, both because God would not have allowed us to be deceived about the true nature of the world, and because God is in a position to bring it about that ideas represent objects – that our minds reflect reality. Scientific realists accept that the existence of God cannot be deductively demonstrated, and are aware that representationalism cannot be grounded on the reduction of the physical world to constructions of sense-data, but they maintain (contra Hume and contra Quine) that representationalism is the best available explanation of the success of our epistemological endeavor. After all, the scientific realist would say, *something* must account for the fact that science not only enables us to explain the operation of physical phenomena, but provides us with ever more powerful and comprehensive explanations of these phenomena. This cannot simply be an accident.

Hilary Putnam used to be a scientific realist; though, as he points out, he was never really committed to the traditional representationalism of Descartes. As he says in “Why is a Philosopher?”, his “realism was not simply a revival of past ideas,” since “it consisted in large part in an attack on conceptions which had been central to realism from the seventeenth century on.”¹ He was, after all, aware that traditional representationalism

¹ Putnam 1990a, p. 108.

required that the mental representations of each individual be produced by their corresponding objects, and that our knowledge of these objects is thus a function of these representations and their contents. Putnam has famously argued that the contents of an individual's mental representations cannot possibly suffice to account for his or her knowledge of certain objects, however, since the contents and even the existence of our representations are often not the product of our contact with the relevant objects at all, but are the product of our contact with others (and their reports of their experiences) who have had certain kinds of contact with these objects.² For most of us, our knowledge of gold, and our ability to speak meaningfully about gold and its chemical properties are, for instance, not a result of our own interaction with gold and its production in us of the relevant (chemically expressible) concept. Our concept of gold, for the most part, goes as far as "that bit of metal there, and other bits like it," and our knowledge of its chemical properties (and thus our ability to distinguish gold from silver, or what have you – in other words, to "pick gold out") is filled in by those who possess the relevant expertise.³ The upshot of this would seem to be that *our* concept of gold (as opposed to the chemist's concept) neither originates in the way specified by Descartes, nor could possibly be robust enough to represent gold as such (or anything specifically else, for that matter). That we can refer to gold at all, Putnam suggests, is a result of the fact that there *is* some specific thing (gold) to be identified in terms of its essential properties, and that our intention to refer consists of an intention to refer to "bits of metal that are the same (in

² Putnam 1990b.

³ Ibid.

whatever sense of sameness is essentially relevant) as this bit here,” where we defer to the appropriate experts to say what senses of sameness are essentially relevant.⁴

The fact that traditional representationalism required this modification was not, however, by itself enough to persuade Putnam to abandon representationalism altogether. It convinced him that the traditional representationalist view could not be the whole story, but not that representationalism was unsalvageable. Indeed, it would be difficult to see how this modification could require us to reject representationalism altogether. For one thing, so long as certain of our concepts represent their objects (in the traditional way), and serve both to secure our scientific practice and to support the balance of our belief structure, then the fact that some of our concepts contain promissory notes for their content to be spelled out by the relevant experts (and by future science) does not defeat representationalism, but merely calls for an adjustment. This was not Putnam’s position, however. Again, as a scientific realist, he had abandoned the view that there could be any privileged representations or *a priori* certification of representationalism. Instead, he maintained that short of accepting that there is a fixed realm of mind-independent entities with determinate properties, whose natures we can discover by means of scientific investigation, there is no way to account for the success of science and our scientific practices – that is, of our epistemic enterprise. In “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” Putnam observes that

It is beyond question that scientists use terms as if the associated criteria were not *necessary and sufficient conditions*, but rather *approximately* correct characterizations of some world of theory-independent entities, and that they talk as if later theories in a mature science were, in general, *better* descriptions of the *same* entities that earlier theories referred to. In my opinion the hypothesis that this is right is the only

⁴ Ibid.

hypothesis that can account for the communicability of scientific results, the closure of acceptable scientific theories under first order logic, and many other features of scientific method.⁵

Scientific realism is often criticized on the grounds that the success of science does not stand in need of any explanation, or that any explanation we could give would either be circular (by taking for granted the criteria of success already implicit in science itself) or otiose (since the explanation would neither improve our scientific practice nor our understanding of this practice).⁶ This last criticism was, in fact, apparently what convinced Putnam to abandon scientific realism and representationalism.

Representationalism began to seem to him not to constitute a serious explanation of anything:

How does the familiar explanation of what happens when I 'see something red' go? The light strikes the object (say, a sweater), and is reflected to my eye. There is an image on the retina (Berkeley knew about images on the retina, and so did Descartes, even if the wave aspect of light was not well understood until much later). There are resultant nerve impulses (Descartes knew there was some kind of transmission along the nerves, even if he was wrong about its nature—and it is not clear we know its nature either, since there is again debate about the significance of chemical, as opposed to electrical, transmissions from neuron to neuron). There are events in the brain, some of which we understand thanks to the work of Hubel and Wiesel, David Marr, and others. And then—this is the mysterious part—there is somehow a 'sense datum' or a 'raw feel'. *This is an explanation?*

An 'explanation' that involves connections of a kind we do not understand at all ... and concerning which we have not even the sketch of a theory is an explanation through something more obscure than the phenomenon to be explained.⁷

In fact, Putnam offers at least three related lines of argument against representationalism as an epistemology, and, like Quine, apparently concludes that the failure of

⁵ Putnam 1975, p. 237.

⁶ See, for instance, Rorty 1979, pp. 282-284 and 339-341, Williams 1980, "Coherence, Justification, and Truth," pp. 271-272, and van Fraassen 1980, pp. 39-40.

⁷ Putnam 1987, pp. 7-8.

representationalism is the failure of rationalism once and for all. I shall argue that Putnam's criticisms of representationalism are unsuccessful (though, again, I believe that representationalism fails for other reasons, to be discussed in the next chapter), and that, like Quine, Putnam does not address himself to rationalism generally in a way that would motivate his empiricism and his adoption of pragmatism over every version of rationalism. His arguments against rationalism in general only tell, in fact, against representationalism specifically, and we shall see that Putnam's criticisms of representationalism fail for the same reason that they fail truly to engage rationalism – namely, they all assume empiricism. We shall also see that, as was the case with Quine, Putnam's pragmatism prevents him from being able to rule out either rationalism or metaphysics.

The First Argument

What is, perhaps, Putnam's most famous argument against representationalism is his "Brains in a vat" argument. What seems often to go unnoticed, or at least unappreciated (or underappreciated) about this argument is that it is aimed only at representationalism as a rationalist epistemology, and is effective only against representationalism (if it is effective at all, which it is not, as presented by Putnam). Putnam as much as acknowledges this in *Reason, Truth and History* when he pauses to "consider why it seems so strange that such an argument can be given (at least to philosophers who subscribe to a 'copy' conception of truth)."⁸ This is significant because even if Putnam's argument were successful in defeating representationalism, it would not succeed in defeating rationalism *simpliciter*, so long as there are other possible versions

of rationalism. As we have seen, the possibility of other versions of rationalism is an open question, inasmuch as none of the arguments we have considered so far that have been adduced to rule it out can offer a non-metaphysical rationale for doing so, and inasmuch as the reason for this would seem to be that only a metaphysical justification could be offered for ruling out rationalism (which would vitiate the justification).

Putnam's argument, however, is intended to show that even if we are brains in a vat, we can neither know nor even so much as truthfully say that we are brains in a vat, since there is no way for our brain-in-a-vat word "vat" to "hook onto" the vat that contains us. If this argument were successful, Putnam would have succeeded in showing that there is no way to meaningfully formulate the skeptical hypothesis that serves as the basis of the development of representationalism as an epistemological position (which hypothesis representationalism is designed to defeat). Putnam's argument is relatively straightforward, and it goes like this: suppose that we and all sentient creatures are in fact no more than brains floating in vat of nutrient solution and tended by a mad scientist who supplies us with stimulations that give us the (*ex hypothesi*) mistaken impression that we have bodies, inhabit cities, and so on. Now this situation seems physically possible, but if it is not logically possible then it cannot, as a matter of fact, be physically possible after all, and this is the question that concerns us at present: is this situation logically possible (meaning, I presume, that such a situation can be meaningfully and truthfully conceived of and stated by us to be actual)? Putnam's answer is no, it is not.

Putnam claims not only that if we are brains in a vat we cannot possibly know or (meaningfully, truthfully) say that we are, but that since this is so, it cannot possibly be true that we are brains in a vat, since we cannot even meaningfully formulate the

⁸ Putnam 1981, p. 8.

hypothesis that we are. This is because, if we are brains in a vat, then when we use the term ‘brain’ or the term ‘vat’ or the term ‘in’, we are referring not to the brains that we really are and the vat we are really in, but to the brain-image or vat-image or containment concept that we have in our vat-world generated by the mad scientist. This, in turn, is because “there is no connection” between the word ‘brain’ or the word ‘vat’ “as used by these brains” and actual brains and actual vats.⁹ Thus, “if we are brains in a vat, then the sentence ‘We are brains in a vat’ says something false (if it says anything),” since obviously it is false in the vat-world – the only world, according to Putnam, to which the brains can meaningfully refer.¹⁰ “In short, if we are brains in a vat, then ‘We are brains in a vat’ is false. So it is (necessarily) false.”¹¹

To begin with, this last claim certainly does not follow. Putnam’s point is that if, in fact, we are brains in a vat, then there is no way for us to know, represent, or express the fact that we are, and any such expression will be false (in the vat world) and otherwise meaningless. But what justifies the claim that it is otherwise meaningless?¹² What gives Putnam license to claim that “We are brains in a vat” is *necessarily* false? The answer is: nothing; if there are facts we cannot, even in principle, express,¹³ or thoughts that we cannot even in principle know to be true, our inability to express them or know that they are true does not mean that they are not facts (or true) all the same, so Putnam is not entitled to the claim that my thought that I am a brain in a vat is necessarily

⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² If it is, in fact, meaningless, then Putnam should not even be able to meaningfully formulate its refutation in the manner he has, since the claim expressed in the antecedent of his conditional – “If we are brains in a vat” – would be equally meaningless. (See David 1991, p. 892.)

¹³ Whether there are such facts, is, of course, at stake in this debate.

false.¹⁴ To say that there can be no facts we cannot (even in principle) express (or that the very idea of such facts makes no sense), *because* they are not expressible by us, seems to suggest that the limits of intelligibility for us are the limits of reality, as Quine claims. What gives Putnam license to say *that*?¹⁵

In fact, it turns out that Putnam's "proof" that we are not brains in a vat at best proves that we cannot think or conceive or imagine or express that we are brains in a vat. In order to get from the latter conclusion to the former, we would need an additional argument, but Putnam does not offer us one. Crispin Wright makes a similar same point in his "On Putnam's Proof that We Are Not Brains in a Vat." Wright observes that Putnam's proof does not succeed in ridding us of "the real specter to be exorcised" from our nightmares of radical error, because the real specter "is that of a thought whose truth would make a mockery of humankind and its place in nature" – a thought that Putnam's proof cannot assure us is false.¹⁶ Putnam, in a reply to Wright, does, however, suggest that "if we are supposed to be able to think that we are in some state of affairs of a very general kind," such that we cannot conceive of its exact nature, "we have to be able to say *what* type of situation that is."¹⁷ Putnam insists that the very notion that there even are unexpressible facts must be "cashed out" within some theory of reference. This seems to miss the point. The idea is that there may be facts about the nature and structure

¹⁴ To be sure, one might want to know how we could know that there *are* such facts at all, but we need not be troubled by this question here. The point is simply that if such a possibility is conceivable, and I cannot see that it isn't, then Putnam is wrong to say we cannot possibly be brains in a vat. (See also, Forbes 1995, pp. 219-222, and Wright 1994, pp. 237-240.)

¹⁵ As Bryan Magee observes, "The only plausible possibility of a reality completely corresponding to our conceptions of it rests on the possibility that reality itself could be mind-like, or could be created by a mind, or by minds. Paradoxically, it is those philosophers who most confidently do *not* believe this, that is to say those in the empiricist tradition, who are most tightly wedded to an epistemological criterion of reality. That is one of the incoherences of their position" (Magee 1999, p. 357).

¹⁶ Wright 1994, pp. 239-240. See Forbes 1995, pp. 219-222, for another argument to the same effect.

¹⁷ Putnam 1994, p. 286.

of reality that we cannot (now, within our conceptual scheme as it stands, or perhaps ever) express and maybe cannot even think. Putnam remarks that “the notion of *how things are* makes no sense apart from the way in which we interact with those things.”¹⁸ This seems to imply the highly implausible thesis that we cannot conceive of the possibility of there being facts about the world we cannot comprehend. The question is: how could such a thesis be supported? It could perhaps be supported by a general theory about the relationship between language (or concepts) and its (their) referents, to the effect that, as Putnam puts it, “reference is transactional.”¹⁹ It is very hard to see, however, how such a theory about the relationship between language and reality could be defended, short of offering a transcendental argument. Indeed, Putnam, in defending internal realism as a sort of Kantian transcendental idealism without the transcendence,²⁰ seems to need just the sort of argument he has barred himself from having.

What about the claim that the brains in a vat cannot (meaningfully, truthfully) think of themselves as brains in a vat, because their words do not refer to the right objects? Putnam says that the brain-in-a-vat’s word ‘brain’ does not, and cannot, refer to actual (non-vat-world) brains because “there is no connection” between the brain-in-a-vat’s word ‘brain’ and actual brains. Says who? This would be the case if, and only if, the only kind of permissible connection is an *empirical* one.²¹ But Putnam admits that he has built this empiricist assumption into the argument: his procedure, he notes, involves “assumptions which might be described as ‘empirical’ (e.g. the assumption that the mind

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 288.

¹⁹ Ibid. See footnote 45 below for further discussion of this point.

²⁰ See Putnam 1983c, p. 85, where he says that his internal realism is Kant’s “empirical realism” without Kant’s corresponding metaphysical realism.

²¹ Again, one may ask what other sort of connection is possible or actual, but we need not be troubled by this question here. That is a question for a rationalist epistemology to answer.

has no access to external things or properties apart from that provided by the senses).”²²

He claims that in developing this argument he has been reasoning *a priori*, but by this he can only mean that he has been reasoning by means of logic alone.

Who is this argument intended for? Putnam suggests that it is intended for philosophers who adhere to representationalism, but it will convince few rationalists, given its “empirical assumptions.”²³ It can be intended only for scientific realists, who Putnam presumably hopes will follow him in his rejection of representationalism. Putnam’s point seems to be that representationalism cannot be established empirically, and that the conditions of the possibility of representationalism are empirically self-refuting. Again, this should little impress rationalists. It is not clear, however, why it should convince scientific realists either.²⁴ Scientific realism never had any aspirations of *establishing* representationalism within the bounds of empiricism – this was positivism’s goal; rather, scientific realism appeals to representationalism as an inference

²² Putnam 1981, p. 16. One is reminded of Quine’s insistence that “there is no extrasensory perception.”

²³ Putnam (1994), in his reply to Crispin Wright’s (1994) “On Putnam’s Proof that We Are Not Brains in a Vat,” suggests that his proof (in the first chapter of *Reason Truth and History*) is aimed at the “internal skeptic” who aims to “convince us, on the basis of assumptions we ourselves hold, that all or a large part of our claims about the empirical world cannot amount to knowledge,” not at the “infinitely regressive skeptic” who “may raise a skeptical doubt only so that, no matter what premises one may rely on in answering the doubt, he or she can respond, ‘and how do you know *that*?’” (p. 284). This is as much as to acknowledge that Putnam’s proof is not directed at rationalism *simpliciter*.

Putnam observes that the infinitely regressive skeptic could argue that “transcendent reference is possible,” but he claims that infinitely regressive (i.e. Cartesian) skepticism cannot be answered or refuted (p. 285). It could be answered or refuted, however – the infinite regress of justification could come to an end – if transcendent reference (viz., *a priori* awareness) could be shown to be not only possible but self-certifying. I shall discuss this possibility further in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

²⁴ There is a prodigious literature on the question whether Putnam’s argument even succeeds in refuting the sort of skeptical possibility that would be necessary for the formulation of scientific realism, but inasmuch as I have no particular stake in the success of scientific realism and since I believe that Putnam’s anti-skeptical argument does not succeed in refuting representationalism anyway, I shall not attempt to disentangle the many and various threads of this debate here. For some representative samples of the arguments for and against Putnam’s anti-skeptical proof, see Tymoczko 1989, Warfield 1998, and Haukioja 2002 (for), and Wright 1994, Forbes 1995, and David 1991 (against).

to the best explanation (of the success of science).²⁵ Moreover, the claim that the conditions of the possibility of representationalism are empirically self-refuting involves the possibility of our knowing or saying (that we can empirically verify) that representationalism is true, which, again, scientific realists do not assert.²⁶ Let us move on to an argument that is supposed to defeat representationalism at its central point: the claim that our ideas represent the objects of the world.

The Second Argument

Putnam's second argument against representationalism is, in fact, a generalized version of his "Brains in a Vat" argument. Putnam invites us to consider the following hypothetical situation: "An ant is crawling on a patch of sand. As it crawls, it traces a line in the sand. By pure chance the line that it traces curves and recrosses itself in such a way that it ends up looking like a recognizable caricature of Winston Churchill."²⁷ He then asks, "Has the ant traced a picture of Winston Churchill, a picture that *depicts* Churchill?"²⁸ Putnam thinks that the answer is clearly no, and his point is that pictures (images, signs, symbols, representations) of things do not naturally, inherently, or necessarily represent the things they picture. How then do they picture them? By having a particular role and use in a particular context, which itself arose in the particular history

²⁵ It is worth pointing out, however, that Putnam seems to be right to say that the scientific realist's semantic externalism can never be "worked out," because this theory of the causal relationship between concepts and their referents is not a part of our overall scientific explanatory framework, but is a *metaphysical* account of the *success* of that framework that the scientific realist presumably holds on inductive grounds. Any scientific realist who genuinely believes that the causal theory could indeed be worked out is thus mistaken, since there is no way to work out, from within the scientific framework, the metaphysical account of the success of that very framework. On this point Putnam is entirely correct. I would add that scientific realists who are genuinely committed to realist metaphysics should adopt foundationalist metaphysical realism at once.

²⁶ This is because, according to Putnam's argument, the truth conditions of "We are brains in a vat" are its conditions of empirical verification. See Clark Glymour (1982), "Conceptual Scheming."

of the development of a particular linguistic or symbolic scheme, as spoken or utilized by a particular group of speakers. Signs, symbols, representations, images and so on have the meaning they do only in that context. They could be put to meaningful use by other speakers of other languages in other historical situations, but this would not be the *same* meaningful use (even if these other speakers just happened to use the sign or symbol or whatever in question to refer to the ‘same’ entity or entities as the original speakers did). The idea that any sign or symbol could inherently or necessarily refer to a specific object is, Putnam says, a holdover of “magical thinking:” “some primitive people believe that some representations (in particular, names) have a necessary connection with their bearers; that to know the ‘true name’ of someone or something gives one power over it.”²⁹ Moreover, he calls any theory of reference³⁰ that adheres to the notion of inherent or necessary reference a “magical theory of reference.”³¹

Now I should like first of all to observe that this bit of Putnam’s argument is (as I should hope would be obvious) nothing more than insulting rhetorical grandstanding, the force of which would seem to be as follows. It would be “primitive” to believe that signs or symbols can have a necessary (“magical”) connection with their referents. You’re not primitive, are you? You don’t believe in magic, do you? Well, then, I’m sure you’ll agree that representationalism is wrong!

The move here is clear: simply associate the view one is espousing with sophisticated reasoning and the view one is criticizing with superstition. Nobody (no

²⁷ Putnam 1981, p. 1.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁰ For Putnam, the theory of reference is a successor theory to foundational epistemology. An adequate theory of reference would explain (1) the nature of those of our mental contents that are responsible for our contact with the objects of the world, and (2) how, through the mechanism of language, our concepts enable us to refer to (or “pick out”) things in the world.

philosopher, anyway) wants to be unsophisticated. Of course, this does not provide one with a *reason* to reject representationalism, but with a *motive* to reject it: if you defend representationalism, you will seem to your fellow philosophers to be primitive. Perhaps no one can even speak with you (or perhaps no one is really addressing you), since you do not even occupy the same realm of legitimate theory as the rest of us.

Fortunately, two can play at this game. Some primitive people believe that some beliefs are true, or are made true, just because they and everyone else in their tribe adhere to them, focus their energy and attention on them, or meditate on them. A theory of truth or of reference that maintains that what is true is what is warranted assertable within a particular community of speakers, or that what there is just depends on what we say there is in our best available theories, is just a holdover of this sort of “because we say so” thinking. Such “collective energy” theories of truth and reference suffer from the problem that they don’t really explain what they set out to explain. Hilary Putnam, for instance, says that “it is trivial to say what any word refers to within the language the word belongs to, by using the word itself. What does ‘rabbit’ refer to? Why, to rabbits, of course!”³² (As though a speech act, series or set of speech acts, or disposition to certain speech acts could *make* it true that ‘rabbit’ refers to rabbits!) *This is an explanation?*

Of course, pragmatists and meaning holists have produced (to all appearances) sophisticated theories of reference and truth that are meant to clarify just how meaning can be a function (or product, at any rate) of context and linguistic behavior.

Wittgenstein, for instance, offers us the related concepts of language-game and form of

³¹ Putnam 1981, p. 3.

³² Ibid., p. 52.

life. I could complain, perhaps, that such theorists have a lot of work left to do to explain just how the “rules” that govern warranted assertability or stipulation or grammar are introduced, how these rules fix themselves within the linguistic or conceptual framework of a given community, and how they function between speakers, but this would really be beside the point. It would be pure historiographical speculation on my part to claim that such theories of reference and truth are holdovers of primitive “collective energy” theories (as it would be pure speculation on Putnam’s part to claim that representationalism is a holdover of “magical theories of reference”), and in any event it wouldn’t matter even if this were true. What matters is what current pragmatists and holists can and do make of their theory, whatever its origin, just as what matters about representationalism is not where it came from but where it is going. To think otherwise is to commit the genetic fallacy.

Putnam has, or appears to have, a point, however, about the referential use of images, signs, symbols, and representations. Unless (1) all of our representations refer necessarily to their objects, or (2) some of our representations refer necessarily to their objects, and fix the usage of the other representations in our scheme, then there is no way to say what refers to what. What seems to us to be a picture of someone or something does not just “automatically” *refer* to that someone or something. For that matter, a ‘picture’ may not really even *be* a picture unless it functions as a symbol in a representational scheme, as the thought experiment involving the ant seems to show. Putnam considers further counterfactual examples that would suggest that an individual could have all of the requisite representations and still not refer to the same things we refer to by way of these same representations, or not succeed in referring to anything at

all. Thus, it is not just having the representations (even the “requisite ones”) that does the trick, but having a context of use and criteria of use – the right interactions with the right objects under the right circumstances.

Has Putnam simply taken the notion of a representation too literally, as though representations are really tiny pictures inside our heads? Of course no picture of a tree is a picture of a tree unless there is a set of interpretative practices or procedures that *makes* the picture one of a tree and not a one of a groundhog, but while this holds for *pictures*, it need not hold for every kind of representation. Some representations could be necessarily linked to their objects through a similarity of formal features that is non-pictorial. Moreover, some representations could be linked to their objects simply in virtue of the fact that those representations are causally linked to those objects: the objects in question gave rise to the representations in question. In fact, there are philosophers who have proposed that our mental representational schemes function holistically, and that representations are assigned a conceptual role in our scheme according to how they were caused and with what other objects or experiences they are causally (or emotionally, or what have you) associated.³³ Putnam acknowledges this, and observes that: “if there are mental representations that necessarily refer (to external things) they must be of the nature of *concepts* and not of the nature of images.”³⁴

His reply, however, is that the notion of a concept fares no better than the notion of a representation. We could just as easily imagine, he says, someone having the requisite concept and being unable to refer as we can imagine someone having the requisite representation and being unable to refer. Having a concept, Putnam insists,

³³ See, for instance, Ned Block 1995.

³⁴ Putnam 1981, p. 17.

involves having the “*ability* to use sentences in situationally appropriate ways,” and he then proceeds to offer examples of the exercise of this ability.³⁵ The problem is that all of his examples – pointing to a tree, for instance – involve the use of concepts whose source can only be empirical. In fact, his discussion of the nature and use of concepts is meant to support his claim that “one cannot refer to certain kinds of things, e.g. *trees*, if one has no causal interaction at all with them,” but this is clearly empiricist.³⁶ Putnam does not even consider the possibility that some concepts necessarily refer *a priori*, and instead takes empirical reference as the paradigm case of “situationally appropriate use” of a concept. A justification that assumes empiricism can provide no support for the empiricist assertion it was meant to defend. Ruling out *a priori* concepts that necessarily refer would be consistent with scientific realism, but Putnam is not here defending scientific realism, he is abandoning it. Moreover, in failing even to consider the possibility of privileged representations, or a non-representationalist rationalism as an alternative, Putnam’s argument neither defeats representationalism nor defeats rationalism generally, and for the same reason: it assumes empiricism.

The Third Argument

In “Why There Isn’t A Ready-Made World,” Putnam in fact offers no *general* reasons for thinking that there isn’t a ready-made world (a mind-independent world of objects possessing determinate properties), but rather argues that the idea that there is a ready-made world is not, contrary to the hopes of scientific realists, consistent with a commitment to materialism. As was the case with the first two arguments, then,

³⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

Putnam's third argument is aimed primarily, if not exclusively, at scientific realism. Here we at last get a glimpse of Putnam's reasons for apparently ignoring rationalism altogether. "The reason that I am going to focus my attack on materialism," he says,

is that materialism is the only *metaphysical* picture that has contemporary 'clout'. Metaphysics, or the enterprise of describing the "furniture of the world", the "things in themselves" apart from our conceptual imposition, has been rejected by many analytic philosophers ... and by all the leading brands of continental philosophy. Today, apart from relics, it is virtually only materialists (or "physicalists", as they like to call themselves) who continue the traditional enterprise.³⁷

I should again like to begin by pointing out that Putnam's choice of words here amounts to nothing more than insulting rhetorical grandstanding. Perhaps in this case it would seem to depend rather on one's point of view: is Putnam being derisive by calling traditional metaphysicians "relics," or is he is merely being *descriptive*? After all, rationalists nowadays are few and far between, and now perhaps appear as remnants of the last vestiges of early analytic philosophy in the tradition of Frege and Russell.

This is simply no longer the case (and of course I dispute the assumption that the only possible remaining versions of rationalism are versions of representationalism). Jarrold J. Katz, whose version of rationalism I consider in Chapter Six, went over to rationalism after having spent most of his career and indeed most of his life working on problems in the philosophy of language in the (empiricist) analytic tradition. Laurence Bonjour, whose version of rationalism I consider in Chapter Seven, went over to rationalism after working to defend a coherentist account of empirical knowledge.³⁸

Moreover, to call someone a relic is not merely to describe them, but to insult them. The force of the rhetoric here would seem to be as follows. Traditional

³⁷ Putnam 1982, p. 144.

metaphysicians are behind the times, out of date or out of fashion, near curiosities in this day and age, and out-of-step with the movement of philosophical thought and history. Nobody wants to be behind the times. Of course, this does not provide one with a *reason* to reject metaphysics, but with a *motive* to reject it: if you defend traditional metaphysics, you will seem to your fellow philosophers to be a relic. Perhaps no one can even speak with you (or perhaps no one is really even addressing you), since you do not even occupy the same realm of legitimate theory as the rest of us.

Besides the fact that Putnam's language is loaded, however, the attitude toward traditional metaphysics and rationalism nakedly revealed here is simply unwarranted, if the argument I have been developing over the course of the last four chapters is correct. Like Quine, Putnam seems to take for granted that rationalism breathed its last with the death of positivism – that once representationalism is defeated, rationalism is finished. As I have shown, however, the arguments advanced by both positivists and (neo-)pragmatists in the twentieth century that were designed to demonstrate the untenability of rationalism and the impossibility of metaphysics at most demonstrate the untenability of representationalism, and provide (and can provide) no basis for the rejection of metaphysics or rationalism generally. Indeed, Putnam seems to assume that there can be no *a priori* basis for representationalism (other than a demonstration of the existence of God by reason (logic) alone, which is of course impossible), and does not so much as consider the possibility of *a priori* awareness of the structure and nature of reality in non-representationalist terms. Putnam says, “the situation was summed up by Kant: Kant held that the whole enterprise of trying to *demonstrate* the existence and nature of a

³⁸ BonJour 1985.

supersensible world by speculation leads only to antinomies.³⁹ ... Today, as I remarked, only a few relics would challenge this conclusion, which put an end to Rationalism as well as to the medieval synthesis of Greek philosophy with revealed religion.” There’s that word again! The point here, however, is that Putnam seems to take for granted (or is at least quite confident) that to defeat representationalism in its apparently final refuge (scientific realism – “materialism,” or “physicalism”) is to defeat rationalism and metaphysics pretty much once and for all. Putnam believes representationalism to be doomed to failure, but this is because he thinks that the only way in which the traditional metaphysical hope of a privileged standpoint can be preserved is by way of the establishment of a correspondence relation (or something like it) between our words or concepts and the objects of the world, or some of them.

For Putnam, then, the final fate of rationalism and metaphysics rests squarely upon the hopes of a physicalistically specified causal theory of direct reference to things-in-themselves, which, incidentally, Putnam thinks is not to be had. Putnam argues at length that the nature of cause cannot be physicalistically specified or defined, and that if we have to take a mentalistic notion like causation to be an irreducible, non-definable fundamental element of our current or future science, this is not merely an adjustment of materialism but an abandonment of it.⁴⁰

What is worse, however, is this. Causation, Putnam observes, is no better off than any of our other terms or concepts from the standpoint of the possibility of getting our concepts

³⁹ Putnam 1982, p. 154. It’s not clear why our only recourse is *speculation*, but presumably this is because speculation is all that we have unless the mind is simply capable of having contact with or awareness of reality as such – as Putnam puts it, of having an “intellectual intuition” or *intellektuelle Anschauung*. Whether these are our only two options, and what we should make of this possibility is a subject I take up in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 152.

or terms to correspond with reality. To see why this is so, consider the following. How do we get our concepts to hook on to the objects of the world? Putnam observes that “an act of will (or intention) won’t work. I can’t simply pick one particular correspondence relation, because in order to do that I would need already to be able to think about the correspondence C – and C, being a relation to things which are eternal and mind-independent, is itself something outside the mind, something ‘external’!”⁴¹ This, however, is putting things backward. No representationalist assumes that we must *get* our concepts to hook on to reality. The view of the representationalist is that the objects of the world *cause* our representations of them, and so *of course* the correspondence relation is causally grounded. Intentionality isn’t an *explanation* of the possibility of contact with things-in-themselves, it is (if it is anything) evidence for this contact. Now it is true that in order for us to identify and specify a single relation as *the* correspondence or representation relation, we must already be capable of contact with things-in-themselves. As Putnam says in *Reason, Truth and History*, “you can’t single out a correspondence between two things just by squeezing *one* of them hard (or by doing anything else to just one of them); you cannot single out a correspondence between our concepts and the supposed noumenal objects without access to the noumenal objects.”⁴² This correspondence or representation relation, however, must obtain *ex hypothesi* for representationalism even to get off the ground. The representationalist has not begged any questions at this point. She must then, however, be able to certify that the representation relation is as her epistemology says it is.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 143.

⁴² Putnam 1981, p. 73.

This is what Putnam says the materialist cannot do, and on this point he is correct. Here's why. Any concept we have is simply part of our overall empirical explanatory framework, and it would be hopeless to try to justify any concept or cluster of concepts by appealing to another concept, since they are all in the same boat, epistemically speaking. So long as we adhere to an empiricist account of language learning and language use, none of our concepts can refer to anything (any object, any entity, or any fact) other than those that are available to us through our senses. But then, in that case, it is clear that none of our concepts is in a special or privileged position to certify the operation of our senses, and thus none of them may serve as a ground for any of the others. Therefore, no concept in our explanatory framework can be provided with a framework-independent or framework-transcendent meaning.

Again, however, scientific realists are not in the business of certifying representationalism, and though Putnam contends that representationalism is inconsistent with materialism, he achieves this result only by way of a demonstration of the fact that there is no way to establish representationalism within materialism (or natural science) alone. Who, other than positivists, says there is? Moreover, since he again neglects to consider the possibility of *a priori* certification of representationalism, he has not defeated it, but merely demonstrated that it is empirically uncertifiable, which was already established with the death of positivism, and which is the reason why scientific realists despair of supporting representationalism deductively.

Our consideration of Putnam's position need not end there, however. In *The Many Faces of Realism*,⁴³ Putnam considers the question whether there is (or whether it makes sense to say there is) one and only one way the world truly is (but many ways of

superficially “cutting it up”), or there could be two (or more), non-compatible interpretations of the structure and contents of reality, both (or all) of which could be right or true in some sense. He observes that “metaphysical realists to this day continue to argue about whether points (space-time points, nowadays, rather than points in the plane or in three-dimensional space) are individuals or properties, particulars or mere limits, etc.,” and he offers the following: “my view is that God himself, if he consented to answer the question, ‘Do points really exist or are they mere limits?’, would say, ‘I don’t know’; not because his omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense.”⁴⁴ Very well, but what is the limit? If, as Putnam suggests in *Reason, Truth and History*, the limit is that of human intelligibility, and if the accounts of the contents of our concepts and of our use of language are empiricist, then we arrive at the same result as we did in our consideration of Quine’s arguments against rationalism and the possibility of metaphysics.⁴⁵ Either Putnam’s view assumes an empiricistic account of concept acquisition and so begs the question against the rationalist, or his pragmatism (internal realism) prohibits him from really ruling out rationalism and metaphysics, since the only justification he could offer for locating the limit of meaningfulness at the limit of our language (or concept-scheme) would have to be metaphysical in nature.

⁴³ And in *Realism With a Human Face*.

⁴⁴ Putnam 1987, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Putnam (1994) insists that “as John Dewey urged in *Experience and Nature* and elsewhere, all reference is transactional,” and he claims that this leads us to “agree with Rorty that the idea of the mirror of nature – the language that is nature’s own language, intrinsically, the language that is ‘correct’ for reasons which have nothing to do with how we interact with nature, apart from how we are embedded in nature – makes no sense” (p. 288). This, again, assumes representationalism, or at least assumes some sort of non-monadic pluralist metaphysics, but we need not go along with these assumptions. For further discussion of this point, see Chapter Eight.

But enough. To go on like this would be tiresome, and the point has, I think, been made. The survival of representationalism as apparently the only possible version of rationalism has made it seem that rationalism itself is untenable. This is not the case, but since the possibility of rationalism now looks like the last hope for traditional metaphysics (given the ascendancy of empiricism and naturalism in the wake of the demise of rationalism's "only" version), empiricists have proclaimed the death of metaphysics since the dawn of the twentieth century. Representationalism is not the only possible rationalist epistemology, however, and the arguments that have been advanced by both positivists and pragmatists to demonstrate that metaphysics is impossible and rationalism is dead can only be supported by metaphysical assertions of the kind these arguments were supposed to reveal to be impossible or meaningless.

I myself have insisted over and over again, however, that representationalism is untenable, and that we need a better rationalist epistemology, but I have not yet offered an argument against representationalism, nor offered an alternative rationalist epistemology. It is high time I did so, and moved on to a consideration of non-representationalist rationalisms. There is, I believe, an effective demonstration of the ultimate untenability of representationalism available, and I think that this demonstration is pretty well clinched by Richard Rorty in his *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature*. (The germ of this demonstration is implicit in Putnam and in Quine, in their observation that, short of *a priori* certification of the correspondence of certain of our concepts or representations with reality as such, there is no way to "get outside our own heads," or

outside of our own language or conceptual scheme, in order to “check its fit with reality.”) It is to Rorty and to this demonstration that I now turn.

CHAPTER 5

RORTY: THE END OF REPRESENTATIONALISM AND THE ELIMINATION OF EPISTEMOLOGY

There is a feeling of apparent rightness about representationalism; it just seems so simple and straightforward. So long as we imagine that there are objects in the world, or that there is a way the world is, it seems natural to suppose that the relationship between our minds and what's not in our minds consists of our having accurate mental images of these things.¹ This account enjoys such pictorial obviousness that it has attracted many, if not most, Western philosophers, and has remained at the center of epistemological inquiry for 2000 years. Hilary Putnam notes that representationalism was the epistemological position that "ancient and medieval philosophers attributed to Aristotle," and, as I noted in the first chapter, Descartes' version of representationalism borrowed elements of its central conceptual apparatus from Scholastic philosophy, which itself has its origins in the work of Aristotle.²

While the representationalist schema seems intuitively natural and structurally modest, it rather quickly leads us to a host of counter-intuitive consequences, and requires accommodations and adjustments of great complexity. Indeed, its problems are

¹ It is worth noting here that this schema appears to take for granted that we are distinct from the world and its objects – in the sense of being distinct entities or substances – so that we must be gotten into a certain sort of relationship with the world (or its objects) in order to know anything about it. In that case, however, it would seem somewhat mysterious that conscious beings alone have a certain special power to "picture" other distinct entities and their relations to one another. To dispel the mystery requires one of two things: either that (1) the world is itself a mind, or was created by a mind, or is mind-like, or is otherwise sufficiently similar to the mind to make a mind-world connection possible, or that (2) our minds possess a special sort of intuition or faculty that puts us in contact with the world. The traditional apparatus of representationalism, then, takes metaphysical pluralism for granted. This is not necessarily to say that metaphysical pluralism requires representationalism as its epistemology. Perhaps metaphysical pluralism can be supplied with a non-representationalist rationalist epistemology; the point here is that the question of the tenability of rationalism is clearly bound up with the ancient metaphysical problem of the one and the many. I shall explore this issue further in Chapter Eight.

² Putnam 1981, p. 57.

many and varied, and serious difficulties arise at every point of its theoretical apparatus: at the point of the objects that constitute the source of our representations, at the point of the nature of the representations themselves, and the point of our use of these representations. Many of the problems of representationalism are by now quite familiar. One of the most obvious of these is that if we are aware of objects and their properties in virtue of mental representations that register these properties, how can we ever be in error about the properties or nature of a given object? Plato was aware of this problem with representationalism (among others), and rejected representationalism as an account of knowledge on the grounds that it could not accommodate the possibility of error (so long as we understand representations fairly literally, as little pictures in the head).³ The problem of error has greatly exercised contemporary mental representation theorists as well, who have been working to explain how a system of representations, understood as a formally (that is, symbolically or syntactically) expressed computational scheme, could go wrong.⁴

There are many more problems. If representations are literally little pictures in our heads, where are they? Are they in principle observable by others? That is, could someone else view, say, my representation of elephants, and see that it looked like a picture of an elephant? Since any one picture of an elephant, or of anything, is only a picture of one instance of that kind of thing (of *one* elephant, for instance), how does the representation function as a representation of *all* of the things of that kind?

³ See Plato 1997a, 191c-196d. Plato seems, in fact, to have rejected representationalism generally, though the idea that the mind grasps independently-existing forms through which it apprehends particulars and their properties bears more than a superficial similarity to representationalism. Plato nowhere offers an account of mental entities that would reveal form-grasping to be representational in nature, however.

⁴ See, for instance, Dretske 1995, and Fodor 1995.

Even if we reject this sort of simple-minded understanding of representationalism, however, there are problems. If representations are formally expressed, it is still not clear how representations reflect or capture or represent the properties of their objects. If my representation of *The Grapes of Wrath* captures the fact that it is hundreds of pages long, how does it do that? I may be able to conjure an image of the book in my head, but this image *cannot be my representation* of the book, if we reject the simple-minded approach. (Besides, how will I know that this image represents the book as shorter than *Moby Dick*, if they look about the same thickness in my mind's eye? How could I know which book is really longer unless my representations contain information about the *number* of pages in standard type-face of each book, and do not merely picture the thickness of my copies of them?) Does my mental representation generator assign numeric values to property variables contained in my representations, such as "number of pages?"⁵ If so, how does it do *that*? And how does it assign numeric values to certain variables and the appropriate qualitative values to certain others? How, for instance, does my mental representation reflect both the fact that *The Grapes of Wrath* is hundreds of pages long and the fact that it dramatizes the plight of displaced Oklahoma farm families during the Dust Bowl years? How is this information "encoded?"

This last question hints at another cluster of problems concerning the mind's employment of representations. The idea that representations are pictures would seem to suggest that they do not require any interpretation (though of course this is false, as Wittgenstein and Putnam so strenuously insist), since we can just *see* what it is they

⁵ Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke have both argued that many of our concepts of things do not contain enough information to refer uniquely to their objects anyway. Moreover, Kripke (1980) notes that even if our concepts involve quite a lot of information about a given thing, their objects might have lacked many or

picture, and how the things so pictured are being depicted. If our representations are not little pictures, however, and if the information they contain is then somehow “encoded” in them, how do we make use of this information? That is, how is the mind able to “read” this information? If the mind requires a language or set of rules for decoding the information contained in one’s representations, how are the language or rules expressed? If they are themselves expressed as representations, then we have an infinite regress; if they are “built-in,” how can we know that this built-in encoding and decoding system “hooks on” to the real properties of objects and represents them as they really are?

This last problem was familiar to both Descartes and Locke, and while Descartes thought that appealing to God’s existence guaranteed the potentially accurate operation of our representation generating system, both philosophers noted that certain properties of objects appear differently at different times and places to the same observer, as well as at the same time to different observers. For instance, a bit of stone that appears red in sunlight may appear orange under florescent light, or may look red from one angle and orange from another, even in the same light. Thus, color (among other things) was thought by Descartes and Locke not to be a property of objects themselves, but a feature of our perception of objects caused by other real properties of those objects, such that they have the propensity to cause us to experience them as colored. This, however, leads at once to the counter-intuitive result that many of the properties we sense as belonging to material objects – including solidity, warmth, and roughness – do not actually belong to any objects (under any description) at all. Moreover, once this distinction between real or “primary” properties and “secondary” properties is granted, representationalism is open

even most of the properties we ascribe to them and still have been the same objects for all that, which suggests that even a richly detailed representation can fail to represent its object uniquely.

to the objection, advanced by Berkeley, that primary properties are every bit as observer-relative as are secondary properties, and that there is no way to reduce primary properties to invariantly specifiable qualities attributable to objects.⁶ This would appear to lead to the even more counter-intuitive result that there are no material objects whatever.

None of these problems of representationalism would suffice, however, to demolish it. Representationalism could survive all of the objections implicit in the foregoing puzzles. All that would be required is a sufficiently sensitive adjustment of one or more of the elements of the theory to accommodate the claims of reason or the claims of observation. Indeed, the intuitive appeal of representationalism has prompted many philosophers to take precisely this approach. Some philosophers,⁷ would rather preserve representationalism at virtually any cost than to take the risk of abandoning it, presumably because abandoning it would mean that the entire project of Western epistemology as handed down from Descartes was forfeit. I shall argue, however, over the course of this and the next three chapters, that representationalism must be abandoned because it is internally incoherent, but that we need not therefore relinquish all hope of providing our epistemological enterprise with a secure metaphysical foundation.

Advances in our scientific understanding of nature (which such a metaphysics is intended to underwrite) might seem to rule out the possibility of our having the sort of contact with

⁶ Berkeley also famously observed that ideas could not possibly represent material objects anyway, because ideas are immaterial. For something to represent something else, Berkeley points out, the representation must be similar to what it represents, and immaterial things are in no way like material things. Putnam (1981) suggests that Berkeley is mistaken about this, since “*everything is similar to everything else in infinitely many respects*” (p. 64). This, however, would presumably not be true of two distinct *substances*. Moreover, Putnam (1982), following Hume, insists that properties like causation and disposition are not to be found in nature but are supplied by the mind, and are in fact mental constructions, from which he concludes that to locate these properties in nature is to believe that reality is mind-like. This, however, is as much as to say that the world must be similar to the mind in point of just those structural forms that mirror the structure of cognition for it to be conceived as rationally ordered.

⁷ Carnap, for instance, and positivists generally.

reality that would make metaphysics (understood as an independent field of inquiry into the most general facts about the nature and structure of reality as such) possible. I shall argue, however, that we cannot consistently renounce the Cartesian epistemological project. This, in turn, means that we must accept the Cartesian epistemological standard, and must therefore either have recourse to a secure metaphysics if possible, or to a speculative metaphysics otherwise.

* * *

Hume, like Descartes, Berkeley, and Leibniz before him, saw that representationalism requires independent incontrovertible certification, but he argued (contra Descartes, Berkeley, and Leibniz) that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated deductively, and that we can have no other means of verifying the accuracy of the operation of our so-called faculty of rational intuition. Thus, Hume declared, we cannot possibly establish that our ideas stand in any given relation to the objects of the world. Hume was prepared to accept Descartes' standard, but also to reject representationalism, and to develop an empiricism that makes do with the consequences.

More recently, Quine and Putnam have argued that one cannot stand apart from one's own (or from every) conceptual scheme, or raise oneself out of one's own language, in order to check its fit with reality as such, which is another way of putting the argument first advanced by Hume. This argument, if sound, would mean the end of representationalism, and I contend that it is, ultimately, sound, though not in the forms advanced by Quine, Putnam, or Hume. There are three ways of understanding and

developing this argument. The first two are the most common, though the first way is entirely trivial, and the second cannot successfully defeat representationalism. The third way is advanced by Richard Rorty, and demonstrates the untenability of representationalism.

The argument is sometimes put in terms of the claim that in order to speak of anything or refer to anything we must use our own language, and that there is no way to step outside of the bounds of one's own language to see that it fits with, or fits more or less well with, reality. This is, of course, to express matters figuratively. We must have recourse to language, and generally our own language, in speaking about our direct contact with the world, but this does not rule out the possibility of such contact, which is had (if at all) independently of the language we use to talk about it.⁸ What difference would it make if we used a different language? Only if we already suppose that the language of a community of speakers constitutes their ontology – their way of carving up and experiencing objects and the world – would it make any difference to the possibility of our being aware of mind-independent features of reality that (our) language is the only means we have for expressing this awareness. In other words, our dependence on language only matters if we beg the central questions concerning meaning and reference. If the question is not begged, then the fact that we have to use our own language, or some language or other, in expressing metaphysical realism is as trivial as the fact that we have to use language to order french fries. Telepathy aside, how else would we do it?

Besides, no metaphysical realist ever suggested that we could step outside of our own language in order to check its fit (or lack of fit) with reality. Establishing the

correctness of representationalism would indeed require either that (1) we can appeal to someone or something that could certify, from its “perspective,” that mental representations reflect reality, or that (2) we can identify certain representations that necessarily refer to their objects, and that fix the reference of our other representations. In neither case, however, must we be able to step outside our own language or system of representations or concepts. How could we (if it even makes sense to talk about such a thing)? Why would anyone suppose that the metaphysical realist would commit herself to a position that requires her to take up a perspective no one could possibly occupy?⁹

On the other hand, if neither of the two options outlined above is available (as Putnam and Quine believe), then taking up this impossible position would be our only other choice, which is clearly out of the question. At most, then, this claim is shorthand for the claim that there can be no scheme-independent certification of representationalism, since the only remaining means of doing so is patently off limits. The fact that the argument is couched in terms of our use of our language to describe the world is irrelevant, as the metaphysical realist hastens to point out.

What, then, of the claim that there can be no scheme-independent certification of representationalism? Rather than repeat the arguments advanced in the last two chapters, I will simply note that this claim, as expressed by Hume, Putnam and Quine, fails to

⁸ As William Alston (1999) remarks, “of course, when we use the word ‘true’ or any other term, we are using *our* language, if we know what we are talking about. Who else’s language might we be using?” (p. 625)

⁹ The idea that the rationalist is committed to such a view has nevertheless been, I fear, the source of many attacks on rationalist epistemology. (See, for instance, Maria Lugones’ “Purity, Impurity and Separation.”) It is sometimes claimed that the rationalist, in order to justify her rationalism, must be able to take up a perspective or viewpoint, or position outside of all perspectives (or viewpoints, or positions) in order to survey the whole (including her own position) and reflect upon it, which is clearly something no one could possibly do, since the very idea of a conscious being occupying a perspective-of-no-perspective is incoherent. This just begs the question against the rationalist, by assuming without argument that taking up

defeat representationalism, unless it can be established empirically, as it cannot, that there can be no *a priori* awareness. In demonstrating the impossibility of such awareness, the neo-pragmatist or empiricist either begs the question against the rationalist by assuming an empiricist account of concept acquisition and use, or else must offer a metaphysical justification of the claim that no word in any language could refer necessarily to its referent. This, of course, they cannot do without refuting the claim they are trying to establish. The third way of developing this argument, however, succeeds in defeating representationalism, and it runs as follows.

Richard Rorty argues that there can be no “privileged access” to the world that can justify the belief that our ways of thinking and talking about it “hook on” to it at the appropriate points – that is, represent it correctly. However, Rorty’s point is that our supposed means of direct contact with the world itself will be, must be, conceived in terms of other aspects of our total representational framework, which means that our specification of the means of contact is not merely in the same boat as the rest of the framework, but *must exhibit the same form as the rest of the framework*. Rorty, claiming to be paraphrasing Putnam, observes that “the attempt to get a set of nonintentional relationships (such as those offered by a causal theory of reference or by a Sellarsian notion of ‘more adequate picturing’) is always vitiated by the fact that those relationships *are simply further parts of the theory of the world of the present day*.”¹⁰ This observation, however, represents a significant advance over any of the formulations offered by either Putnam or Quine. Rorty’s argument here implies not that the only means we can have for certifying any of our concepts would just be more (empirically

such a perspective is the rationalist’s only recourse, and that perspectives consist in nothing more than discrete, equally “valid” ways of carving things up.

specified) concepts, but that, if getting the world right amounts to a certain sort of picturing or mirroring relation between representations and the world, then our picture of the picturing relation must itself accurately reflect reality (even if this picture of the picturing relation is supposedly certifiable *a priori*), which means that it must itself be a picture, and leads to the conclusion that the representationalist is trapped in an infinite regress. The real force of the claim lies in the observation that if we suppose that representations mediate our awareness of the objects of the world, then the relationship between minds and the world cannot be that representations picture the world, for then it would be pictures all the way down. In other words, representationalism is internally incoherent.

A number of representationalist responses seem possible here, but none seems plausible. The representationalist could argue that the second-order certification of the first order picture need not itself be pictured accurately, since, if the relationship between language and the world consists of the former picturing the latter, then once we could see that we had got the picture of picturing right, we would need to look no further. However, this is to miss the force of Rorty's argument. Our "seeing that we had got it right" would itself just consist of another picture. The representationalist could claim that the picture of the picturing relation enjoys a special status because of the place it occupies within the representationalist framework. However, this has no more plausibility than the positivist's claim that the verification principle enjoys a special status because of its function as the arbiter of meaningfulness. The only apparent recourse for the representationalist at this point is to block the regress by arguing that the picturing relation itself does not require a picture, but this would be to reduce the picture theory

¹⁰ Rorty 1979, p. 298, italics added.

itself to a piece of representationalist dogma, and would force the representationalist to begin anew the search for foundations, this time seeking to tie both our total framework *and the picture theory* to reality.

It gets worse. One last reply the representationalist might make is that if there were something between a representation and its object, the presence and character of which could not be doubted, something that was not itself a representation but could underwrite or otherwise certify the content of a representation (such as an impression or sense datum or raw feel or “what is given”), then representationalism could still be saved. It is bad enough that, as Quine demonstrated, the positivistic hope of reducing physical objects to sense data is vain. What is still worse, however, is that Wilfrid Sellars demonstrated that if something (like sense data) did not have the form of a representation, then it could not possibly certify the content of a representation, and if it is a representation (or is representation-like), then it would stand in need of the same certification as the rest of our scheme.¹¹

* * *

Rorty, like Quine and Putnam before him, draws the conclusion that no direct contact with the world is possible (though, of course, this conclusion is not supported by the argument, since it is aimed only at representationalism). Unlike Quine and Putnam, however, who still endeavor to identify the boundary between sense and nonsense, meaningful and meaningless discourse, Rorty advocates a meta-philosophical stance. He maintains that the history of modern philosophy since Descartes can be viewed as a

sustained, but failed, attempt to rationalize all discourse by providing an account of the aim of discourse as the certification of its own foundations, and of our knowledge of the world, through the identification of our means of direct or privileged contact with reality.¹² Here again he goes further than either Quine or Putnam, and not only equates representationalism with foundational epistemology as such, but goes on to argue that epistemology is not the central project of philosophy, and that the project of rationalizing discourse should be abandoned altogether.

Since the rise of empiricism, Rorty observes, science has been taken to be our means of contact *par excellence*, and we portray the past of humanity within our epistemological tradition as leading naturally to the present moment, by way of a series of ever more accurate, if sometimes crude and awkward, attempts to mirror the structure of the world through scientific and philosophical activity.¹³ Rorty maintains that this attempt to rationalize discourse through the idea of human beings (and their activities) as mirrors of nature generates a metaphysics that provides human beings with one way of conceiving of themselves, but that other ways are possible, and that there is no way of grounding any such total metaphysical framework in the world through some form of privileged access to it, and thus no way of saying that any total framework is more rational than any other, or deserves special status.¹⁴ Rorty therefore proposes that the

¹¹ Sellars 1963, Chapter 5, esp. pp. 127-134.

¹² Rorty also sees this attempt at rationalization in the ancients, and, like Heidegger, he traces the roots of this conception of human beings as mirrors of nature back to Plato and Aristotle, but Rorty focuses primarily on the epistemological project of philosophy as it has been carried out since Descartes, and most especially, since the rise of positivism (or a little before; since the Linguistic Turn, anyway), partly because, according to Rorty, "Aristotle did not have—did not feel the need of—a theory of knowledge" (1979, p. 263). It should go without saying that I believe Rorty is wrong about this.

¹³ Rorty 1979, p. 282.

¹⁴ It should be noted that this meta-philosophical approach takes complete metaphysical conceptions of the world as its unit of currency, and notes the historical contingencies which generate trade in them and among them.

attempt at rationalization through the grounding of our epistemological project should be renounced, and should not be replaced with any new philosophical method (where to have a method would involve another attempt at the rationalization of discourse, the specification of the bounds of meaning or sense). Instead, Rorty insists that we strive for edification through hermeneutics, which would not constitute a new philosophic method, but would study the relationship between normal (rationalized) discourse and abnormal (initially “irrational,” because alien) discourse, and would concentrate upon, and generate, abnormal discourse, so as to keep the human conversation moving.

It is not clear, however, how Rorty’s hermeneutics is supposed to offer an alternative to philosophic method. Presumably, hermeneutics is not itself a method which seeks, or needs (or wants), grounding in reality. The temptation, though, is to ask: “Yes, but is this meta-philosophical perspective *true*?” That is, is the account it offers of totalizing metaphysical frameworks getting things right? Perhaps this is a bit philistine. Rorty would simply respond by saying that this question indicates the extent to which we are still trapped within the representationalist’s picture theory, which offers only one metaphysical account of our relation to the world among many possible accounts. Unless we are to beg the question against Rorty, our sense of “true” or “right” cannot just assume representationalism. Rorty would argue that “true” here can mean nothing more than “more fruitful,” or, in Rorty’s idiom, “edifying.”¹⁵ Very well.

What, then, makes Rorty’s hermeneutic meta-philosophical perspective a true history (by his lights) of the attempt to rationalize human discourse? If Rorty is to be consistent, the answer is that his hermeneutic meta-philosophical approach is true in the sense that it is edifying (if it is edifying). But of course this approach itself is simply one

approach among many possible approaches from the standpoint of a meta-meta-philosophical approach to accounts of the history of Western thought, and this approach can be no more privileged than any other. Why adopt one of these approaches over any other? Why, for that matter, adopt the approach of hermeneutic meta-philosophy over the way of (non-representationalist) rationalization and foundational epistemology?

Rorty notes that

Gadamer develops the notion of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (the sort of consciousness of the past which changes us) to characterize an attitude interested not so much in what is out there in the world, or in what happened in history, as in what we can get out of nature and history for our own uses. In this attitude, getting the facts right (about atoms and the void, or about the history of Europe) is merely propaedeutic to finding a new and more interesting way of expressing ourselves and thus of coping with the world. From the educational as opposed to the epistemological, or the technological point of view, the way things are said is more important than the possession of truth.¹⁶

Firstly, this seems to imply an unnecessary opposition; why does one of these have to be more important than the other? Can't we be – aren't we in fact – concerned with both? Why must we equate either with philosophy itself? Can't epistemology be one of philosophy's jobs, and self-realization be another? Plato thought so. Secondly, if self-realization is more important than the possession of truths, does that go also for the (presumably true if edifying) claim that self-realization is more important than the possession of truths? What, then of Rorty's recommendation? Why should we accept this claim?

There does not seem to be any way to resist this conclusion, or in fact to resist the conclusion that any method or theory or description or activity or whatever is not, from

¹⁵ Rorty 1979, p. 360.

the perspective of a still higher meta-philosophical schema, simply one such method among many possible. What, then, is Rorty on about? He certainly ought not be too worked up over the attempt, as he sees it, of Western philosophers to ground their epistemology in the world (even if doing so looks impossible), for, as Rorty himself admits, this attempt is one way which human beings have had of conceiving of themselves. What difference could theoretical considerations concerning the impossibility of direct contact with reality possibly make to the success of Western epistemology *as a mode of self-representation*, so long as it is edifying? (Rorty could argue that it is not edifying, but then what reason could we have for adopting one set of criteria of edification over another, excepting that one set is more edifying?) Unless Rorty intends to say that his meta-philosophical approach to Western epistemology is right, what recommends his claim that the impossibility of grounding it should serve as a reason for abandoning it?¹⁷

This is just the old accusation that relativism is self-defeating, aimed now at Rorty's hermeneutics, and his attempt to renounce the Cartesian epistemological project of distinguishing what can be known from what must remain unknown. If no one total perspective is better than (is to be preferred over, is privileged with respect to) any other, then that must of course also go for the perspective that insists that no one perspective is better than any other, in which case, any reasons we might have had for taking up this perspective go right out the window. The only hope the relativist, or the neo-pragmatist, or hermeneuticist (as the case may be), has at this point is to claim, as implausibly as the representationalist and the positivist before her, that her perspective is not a perspective at

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 359.

all. We can insist that hermeneutics is not a perspective or a method all we like, but if it involves human beings engaging in self-realization, then it is in the same boat as is Western epistemology (assuming Rorty thinks that Western epistemology was even part of an attempt, if a failed one, at self-understanding). If it is not a perspective, then we will want to know why hermeneutics can claim for itself this status as the only activity that is free of the methodological assumptions of all other self-conceptualizing human activities, while metaphysics cannot.

Moreover, Rorty commits himself to the following substantive metaphysical assumption: that there are a potentially infinite (or at least indefinite) number of allowable totalizing metaphysical frameworks, none of which hooks on to reality. If this assumption does not simply beg the question against the metaphysical realist, then, at the very least, it involves Rorty in metaphysical speculation on a par with the realist. Where the metaphysical realist wants to say that there is, in the end, one and only one way the world is, and that we can get it (or at least some of it) right, the neo-pragmatist wants to say not merely that we cannot know this to be true, but that there is no way for *any* possible metaphysics to get the world right. It would seem that the neo-pragmatist is entitled to say that there is (and can be) no mind-independent world of the sort spoken of by metaphysicians to get right in the first place, since this notion of a mind-independent world is itself a concept *within* metaphysical frameworks. This, however, either presupposes that *a priori* awareness of features of mind-independent reality is impossible, and thus begs the question, or requires a synthetic *a priori* claim about an invariant aspect of the structure of every possible metaphysical framework: namely, that none of them can

¹⁷ As Putnam (1990b, p. 25) remarks, "It seems more likely to me that, most of the time anyway, Rorty really thinks that metaphysical realism is *wrong*."

have direct access to reality as such. Rorty claims, as do Quine and Putnam, to have information about the necessary character of the relationship between language or concepts and the world that should, strictly speaking, be prohibited by his pragmatism.

Up to now I have been suggesting that it is a bit of a disappointment to be told that there is a limit to what questions can be meaningfully asked, and that questions such as “how can we be aware of the nature and structure of reality as it is in itself” fall on the nether side of that limit, while at the same time being told that we can offer no reasons why this is so. Such questions look perfectly meaningful, after all, and not just in an “oceanic” way. Moreover, while it may often be difficult to get undergraduate philosophy students to see the bite of such questions, similarly supposedly antinomous questions often arise for the first time in childhood. Even Hilary Putnam notes (interestingly, in “Why There Isn’t a Ready-Made World”) that “when I was 7 years old the question ‘If God made the world, then who made God?’ struck me one evening with vivid force. I remember pacing in circles around a little well for hours while the awful regress played itself out in mind.”¹⁸ These are the sorts of questions that can drive one to become a philosopher. Are we to say that they occur to us first when we are children because they are in fact the product of childish confusion (as so many positivists and linguistic analysts did actually say of classic philosophical questions of the past, as though Plato and Aristotle were mere kids by comparison to us)? Or should we say that such questions must clearly have a sense, since even children can understand them? As we age and learn, we find that often our inability to solve (or resolve) such questions was a result of our youthful lack of ingenuity at identifying slippage in the formulation of the problem, where we can drive in a wedge. Are we to say instead that such questions are in

fact insoluble because meaningless? This is frankly worse than the replies of the adults I pestered with such questions in my youth. They thought, like Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*, that such questions were meaningless in the sense of being impractical, and so not worth bothering about. We are surrounded by philosophers today who consider such questions *literally unintelligible*. They are not, and cannot be, unintelligible on their face. How could they be, if philosophers – intelligent men and women, the finest minds of their times – for two thousand years took such questions seriously? To say that such questions are unintelligible without offering anything more than an empiricist account of language acquisition strikes me as a renunciation of inquiry itself. We cannot renounce comprehensive epistemology – the attempt to distinguish meaningful from meaningless utterance, to distinguish sense from nonsense, to distinguish what can be known from what cannot – as Rorty suggests, because we can offer no reasons but only motives for doing so, and because even these motives have nothing to recommend them, if we abandon all hope of scheme-independent truth. If, however, we cannot abandon this epistemological project, then we must provide a (non-question-begging) account of what it is that we know about language, concepts, and meaning that earlier philosophers in our tradition, who took metaphysical realist questions to be meaningful, did not know. Arguments or observations will need to be offered that appeal to facts about the logical or hidden linguistic structure of such questions; but these, in turn, will require metaphysical assertions about meaning and reference.

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¹⁸ Putnam 1982, p. 144.

Given its intuitive appeal, representationalism has seemed to many philosophers to be the only possible hope for a foundational epistemology, or even the only hope for any epistemology at all, so that many who have been driven to reject representationalism reject also the very possibility that we could know anything about the nature and structure of reality as such, and even deny that reality as such has a nature or structure.¹⁹ This is as much as to say that it has seemed to many philosophers that representationalism, metaphysical realism, and foundational epistemology come to the same thing. Rorty, for instance, maintains that “to think of knowledge which presents a ‘problem,’ and about which we ought to have a ‘theory,’ is a product of viewing knowledge as an assemblage of representations—a view of knowledge which, I have been arguing, was a product of the seventeenth century.”²⁰ It is my contention that this is false. The point here, however, is that the intuitive pull of representationalism is in fact so strong as to make it seem to some philosophers altogether impossible that we could conceive of another metaphysical realist epistemology.

I shall not speculate as to the psychological forces that contributed to this attitude among contemporary philosophers. It is, however, my contention that this attitude is

¹⁹ Putnam makes this last claim in “Why There Isn’t a Ready-Made World.” Strictly speaking, rejecting representationalism does not entitle us to say that the world has no inherent structure. We may have no way of getting our language or thoughts to hook up with the world as it really is, and yet there may still be a way that the world really is, outside of our ways of thinking and talking about it, for all that. This would, of course, be a terribly weak and rather idle sort of realism, but it does not just logically follow from the fact (if it is a fact) that we cannot meaningfully discuss the structure of reality, that it has no structure. The neo-pragmatist’s claim, however, is that what we mean by “structure” (along with what we mean by anything, by any term or concept) is itself just a part of our linguistic framework or conceptual structure, and can thus have no purchase at all where “reality as such” is concerned. Consequently, there is nothing that it could even mean to say that reality itself has a structure; there is no way to talk about our concept (“structure”) applying to the world. I have been insisting on the heavily empiricist assumptions that seem to be at work in this argument: namely, that the terms of our language (or our concepts) can only have such content as is consistent with what we can sense. The argument, however, is also deeply Kantian; we have no right to claim that our (phenomenal) notions apply to (noumenal) reality as it is in itself. All this shows is that we must abandon the entire apparatus and legacy of representationalism (including the Kantian psychologistic reduction of the *a priori*) if we are to have any hope of defending a robust realism.

more a product of psychology than of philosophy, since the current disregard for rationalism and metaphysical realism does not rest on a successful demonstration of their impossibility, contrary to what many philosophers today appear to believe. We must reject representationalism, but this need not imply the death of rationalism and metaphysical realism generally. This leaves open the possibility of developing a non-representationalist rationalism that could serve as a foundational epistemology, and provide us with a defense of metaphysical realism. Such a non-representationalist rationalism would, of course, have to defend itself against alternative epistemologies, but it need not defend itself against the claim that epistemology (as an attempt to secure the metaphysical foundations of, and thusly to explain the possibility of, our knowledge of the world) is impossible, since the arguments that have been offered on behalf of this claim equate representationalism with foundational epistemology. We need do no such thing. Let me be quite clear about this: metaphysical realism and rationalism do not get a free pass that relieves them of the need to look like respectable philosophical theories in light of advances in science, logic, mathematics, evolutionary theory, and so forth. They do, however, get to compete without bias, because the conviction that such positions have been definitively ruled out depends on metaphysical realism's retention of representationalism, and on the mistaken equation above. This conviction is the product of an illusion.

²⁰ Rorty 1979, p. 136.

CHAPTER 6

JERROLD J. KATZ'S REALISTIC RATIONALISM

Rationalism would be established if there were anything that we could know about any aspect or feature of reality as such, through reason alone, without need of (and in the absence of any possibility of) sensory awareness of this aspect of reality. That is to say, rationalism would be established if we can have any knowledge *a priori*. Of course, thoroughgoing empiricists wish to deny that any such knowledge is possible. As we have seen, however, no argument can be offered to this effect, for two (related) reasons: no argument that rests ultimately on sensory evidence alone can warrant the conclusion that *a priori* awareness or knowledge is impossible; and the only sort of argument that could establish this conclusion would require a means of distinguishing what can from what cannot be known, which would in turn require us to appeal to premises whose justification can only be *a priori* (thus vitiating the argument). Thus, empiricists simply cannot rule out (as it were, *a priori*) the possibility of *a priori* awareness or knowledge. Empiricists have, however, produced a number of other arguments that would, if successful, very nearly rule out *a priori* awareness, and rationalism along with it. Any rationalist epistemology, even to get off the ground, must be able to meet these arguments, in addition to being able to defend its account of the furniture of the universe, and our means of awareness of it.

The standard empiricist arguments against the existence of any actual *a priori* awareness or knowledge involve a combination of inductive and dispensability arguments, and they run as follows. Any number of statements have, in the history of Western thought, been identified as being *a priori* knowable, and as constituting *a priori*

knowledge, and many of these have not stood the test of time. Statements that have been held to be *a priori* knowable necessary truths have turned out to be *a posteriori* necessary falsehoods. To take a particularly famous example: Kant, who was trying to save metaphysics from Hume, claimed that Euclidean geometry is the *a priori* science of space, but in fact it is neither an *a priori* science of actual space, nor even an accurate science of actual space. What we *think* is *a priori* (even what we think is demonstrably *a priori*) is not always *really a priori*, and this leaves the rationalist in an uncomfortable position: to say that we know anything *a priori*, we would appear to need an independent means of establishing that a statement or belief is *a priori*, but this means must itself be either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. If it is *a posteriori*, the force of the claim that the belief is *a priori* is lost, but if it is *a priori*, we are launched upon an infinite regress. Since it seems likely that we cannot really know when a belief (or when our knowledge or awareness) is *a priori*, and that beliefs that are purported to be *a priori* have often turned out, and will often turn out, to be otherwise, the notion of *a priori* knowledge is really doing no epistemic work for us,¹ and the claim that there is any *a priori* knowledge at all is inductively suspect.

Secondly, empiricists argue that we need not appeal to *a priori* awareness to account for the knowledge we have.² Even mathematical knowledge, empiricists claim, can be fully explained without recourse to (synthetic) *a priori* knowledge. There are a

¹ Kornblith 2000, pp. 71 and 86.

² Again, empiricists cannot argue that we need not appeal to *a priori* awareness to account for any knowledge we *could* have; thus, empiricists lack what I have been calling a comprehensive epistemology. Presumably, this would not trouble someone like Quine, for instance, who maintains that a comprehensive epistemology, while a nice dream, is out of the question anyway. The point, however, is that Quine is not entitled to this claim, and that we cannot rule out comprehensive epistemology, for the same reason we cannot rule out rationalism: the only rationale for doing so would require an appeal to metaphysical statements that would vitiate the attempt. As I argued in the last chapter, we cannot give up on comprehensive epistemology, because we can offer no rational reasons for doing so.

number of competing empiricist projects aimed at providing such an account, ranging from treating mathematical truth as a type of truth-in-fiction and mathematical knowledge as knowledge of a certain story, to treating mathematical statements as ranging over sets, understood as theoretical posits, and mathematical knowledge as consisting of a web of empirically well-supported statements that enable us to cope with reality. The point on which all such projects and their defenders agree, however, is that some such empiricist project will be able to account for all (actual) human knowledge without once appealing to *a priori* awareness of anything. Following on the heels of this claim, empiricists argue that a successful empiricist account of human knowledge will also be able to explain (or will explain away) the appearance of the necessity of some truths.³ Thus, *a priori* awareness, *a priori* knowledge, and rationalism generally, are dispensable.

Lastly, empiricists argue that rationalists can offer no comprehensible account of the possibility of rational insight, or *a priori* awareness of the structure and nature of reality as such, and thus that a rationalist metaphysics could be nothing other than speculative.⁴ They maintain that even if there seemed to be good reasons for thinking

³ Quine (1980), for instance, suggests that certain statements, such as elementary arithmetical statements, only seem necessarily true because the chances that we would be compelled to revise them seem so vanishingly small, given their centrality to our epistemological framework. Such statements are, however, in principle revisable according to Quine, since (1) we could be confronted with reasons for revising them by recalcitrant experience, and (2) in such a case, the rational course would be to revise them, rather than preserve them at the cost of compromising the phenomena. I would argue that the fact that Quine's epistemology requires him to admit that it is very unlikely that we would have to revise such elementary statements is *prima facie* evidence in favor of the rationalist's contention that the structure of reality is rationally discernable. The development of this claim will, however, have to wait for my next dissertation.

⁴ Empiricists sometimes develop this objection along the lines of the claim that rationalists cannot produce a respectable causal account of the possibility of *a priori* awareness, but since the demand for a respectable causal account often involves a demand for a causal account that empiricists can respect on their own terms, the demand begs the question, as Katz (2000) argues, and as we shall see later in this chapter. The demand for a philosophically comprehensible account is, of course, perfectly reasonable; the demand for an account that falls neatly within the scope of current science and physicalist scruples is not, for reasons that should be obvious.

that we could have *a priori* awareness of some aspect of reality, we have no way of making sense of how this could be possible, other than by positing some sort of “mental grasping” or “mental seeing” of that aspect of reality, that seems more akin to mind rays and occult powers (or “revealed knowledge”) than to any of the other forms and modes of information reception of which we are aware.⁵ If there were any such mode of awareness, surely we would know something more about it by now. Since there does not seem to be any way to make sense of the possibility of *a priori* awareness, then, the prospects for rationalism seem dim, even if we had what would otherwise look like good reasons for thinking that some of our knowledge is *a priori*.

Jerrold J. Katz offers what he calls a realistic rationalism (pun intended) in which he defends a version of metaphysical realism and offers a version of rationalism to account for our knowledge of this ontology, and in which he answers each of the empiricist arguments outlined above. We shall examine Katz’s realistic rationalism to determine whether he has developed a version of rationalism that satisfies the demands we have specified that any epistemology must meet to be acceptable.⁶ We shall see that while Katz’s replies to the empiricist arguments are often quite strong, or at least suggest a direction in which a stronger reply could be developed, not all of his replies are fully satisfactory, and his realistic rationalism will not meet our demands.

⁵ I shall argue, later in the chapter, and again in Chapter Eight, that this sort of criticism on the part of empiricists is not only unwarranted but actually *unmotivated*, and amounts to little more than scientific provincialism (also often involving a straw man caricature of *a priori* awareness). I shall also argue that the best way to understand Katz’s “mystery versus mysticism” argument in *Realistic Rationalism* (2000, pp. 32-34), is as a rebuke of this criticism along the lines I shall develop. I will also return to this issue in Chapter Eight, where I shall attempt to make the very idea of *a priori* awareness seem more metaphysically plausible.

⁶ As a reminder, these demands are as follows: to be acceptable, any epistemology must be capable of answering the Cartesian skeptical question (viz., what, if anything, enables us to have any knowledge whatever?) and of thereby providing a ground for our knowledge (or some foundational part of it), as well

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Katz's reply to the inductive argument is actually fairly strong, though at first it appears rather weak. He is aware, of course, that the challenge to rationalism, and to the possibility of *a priori* knowledge in general, rests in part on historically famous cases of purportedly *a priori* knowledge turning out to be neither *a priori* nor even true.

"Everyone is familiar," Katz observes, "with the standard problems with transcendental idealism, such as the fact that Euclidean geometry, alleged to be an *a priori* necessary truth, turned out to be an *a posteriori* contingent falsehood."⁷ Moreover, Katz acknowledges that "not only did the fate of Euclidean geometry deal a heavy blow to confidence in the Kantian explanation of synthetic *a priori* knowledge generally, but the role of geometry in relativity theory provided a paradigm for treating other alleged *a priori* necessary truths as *a posteriori* contingent truths—highly theoretical, but nonetheless empirical in nature."⁸ His answer, however, is that the fact that Euclidean geometry was *taken* to be known *a priori* to be the science of actual space does not mean that it really was *a priori*. Katz observes that "to be sure, people once believed that it is *a priori* that Euclidean geometry is a true theory of physical space, but Euclidean geometry was never determined *a priori* to be a true theory of physical space."⁹ He goes on to say that "from the fact that it is believed that *p* is *a priori*, it does not follow that *p* is *a priori*. In fact, the grounds for accepting Euclidean geometry as a true theory of physical space

as a metaphysical justification for the location of the boundary between what can be known and what cannot.

⁷ Katz 2000, p. 8.

⁸ Ibid.

were straightforwardly *a posteriori*. The abandonment of Euclidean geometry in physics was a revision of an empirical theory.”¹⁰

This reply seems simply to miss the force of the objection. The objection is that while some statements have appeared to be *a priori* knowable, they have turned out not to be *a priori* or true, and that there does not seem to be any way for us to know when we are really in possession of an *a priori* truth, even when we seem demonstrably to be in possession of such truth. To the extent that the Kantian example is especially salient, it does matter whether Kant (and others) thought he had determined *a priori* that we do know *a priori* that Euclidean geometry is the science of actual space. Katz’s claim is that this was never in fact determined. It is not clear, however, whether he means that nobody (including Kant?) took Kant to have determined it,¹¹ or that even if it had been believed to be demonstrated, it was not. In any event, the former seems unlikely to be true, and the second still misses the point. If Kant (and others) had merely *thought* that he had demonstrated that we know *a priori* that Euclidean geometry is the science of actual space, but were wrong, the empiricist will ask how we can ever know that we are truly in possession of *a priori* knowledge. If Kant could be wrong about this, could we ever know that we got it right?

Katz’s claim is that it should have been obvious, even in Kant’s time, that Kant’s epistemology did not really enable him to show that anything is *a priori* known to be necessarily true. He makes the point in the context of a discussion of mathematical

⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ It is beyond doubt that Kant, at least, thought that he had determined *a priori* (or that a determination could be made) that Euclidean geometry is the science of actual space, because Kant thought that he had shown *a priori* that “space is not a concept that has been drawn from outer experiences,” and that “space is a necessary representation, *a priori*.” From this it would follow that, as Kant puts it “the apodictic certainty

necessity, but the point may be extended to any of Kant's claims concerning *a priori* knowledge, where that knowledge is supposed to flow from the facts about the structure of pure cognition. Katz observes (citing Frege as the source of the observation) that "locating the grounds of necessity within us does not explain the necessity of mathematical truth. It at best explains why we naturally take mathematical truths to be necessary."¹² If this criticism is right, then Kant never had any grounds for claiming that we know anything *a priori* to be necessarily true. This would appear to answer the empiricist's objection, and if this is a fair characterization of Kant's epistemology, it should soften the impression that Kant's epistemology constitutes an acute embarrassment for rationalists.

These considerations can, however, only serve to soften the impression; they cannot eliminate it, and Katz's answer does not provide us with a satisfactory reply to the empiricist. We shall see that Katz's realistic rationalism does only a little better than Kant's transcendental rationalism in its account of *a priori* knowledge of necessary truth, but, worse than this, the empiricist can still maintain that the objection has not been answered. Even if we could (or should) have noticed this consequence of Kant's epistemology, the point is that we didn't (until now, anyway). Once this consequence is conceded, it explains why we should not think that an *a priori* necessary truth was falsified (since it was, apparently, never really *a priori* to begin with), but it does not change the facts that there were intelligent philosophers who thought that a demonstration

of all geometrical principles and the possibility of their *a priori* construction are grounded in this *a priori* necessity [of space]" (Kant 1998, pp. 157-158).

¹² Katz 2000, p. 9. Here Katz makes something close to the criticism of Kant I offer in Chapter One: that Kant's attempt to salvage metaphysics requires abandoning the traditional conception of the *a priori* as consisting of awareness of aspects of reality as it is in itself (outside the mind) in favor of a conception that understands *a priori* knowledge as consisting of awareness of those features of cognition that determine the

of *a priori* knowledge had been successfully carried out, and that they were wrong. This produces a general worry about claims to *a priori* knowledge or knowability: such claims seem vulnerable to future revision and even falsification; how, then, can we ever say confidently that we are in possession of an *a priori* necessary truth (or simply that we know anything *a priori*)?¹³

Katz does not answer this question directly, since he seems to think that the empiricist's concern is that it looks as though some *a priori* necessary truths can be, and have been, falsified. Katz dispatches this worry easily, but then, this worry is easily dispatched. The problem is not how to handle this worry, but is rather that the most obvious way of handling it leads immediately to more serious problems for the rationalist. It is easy to say, simply, that no necessary truth has been falsified because, as it turns out (lucky for us!), the truth (or falsehood) in question was not actually necessary after all. Very well, but if this is our answer, how do we deal with the result that we are committed to saying that *a priori* awareness of necessary truth can be *mistaken*? Katz has an answer, but it must be extracted from his argument that apodictic principles of formal sciences can be known *a priori*, not because they themselves can be established *a priori*, but because they can be shown to be "essential to the best systematization of the body of [formal] knowledge in question."¹⁴ The reason that their being essential to such

structure of experience as such. Kant was, in this respect, one of the very first philosophers to propose naturalism as an alternative to speculative metaphysics.

¹³ Of course, this general worry does not warrant thoroughgoing skepticism with respect to the possibility of *a priori* awareness. If it could be established that such awareness is possible, then we could have reason to think that we, at least sometimes, succeed in having it. Still, so long as our putatively *a priori* knowledge or awareness plays only a systematizing and organizing role within our overall system of beliefs, the status of such putative *a priori* knowledge remains in jeopardy, so long as some other element of the system could imply the need for revision of an (ostensibly) *a priori* belief. As I shall argue further in the next two chapters, at least some *a priori* awareness must be self-certifying for us to have any assurance that any given (putatively) *a priori* truth is really unrevisable.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

a best systematization renders them *a priori* is that “knowledge of basic formal facts is *a priori*, ... the step from that knowledge to transcendent knowledge of formal laws and theories is also *a priori*,” and “filling gaps and correcting errors is *a priori* too,” so “formal knowledge always has the *a priori* warrant of pure reason.”¹⁵

At last we have our answer. Katz adds that “the revisability of *a priori* propositions ... is revisability in the light of further pure ratiocination, not revisability in the light of further empirical discoveries.”¹⁶ Even though we cannot be sure that we are in possession of bona fide *a priori* knowable necessary truth at any given moment, and even though what is thought to be known *a priori* is open to revision, we can only be persuaded to change our minds about the status of such beliefs by additional *a priori* considerations. Thus, while we can be mistaken about what is *a priori* known or knowable, our only means of correcting these mistakes is itself *a priori*, so the worry that we never know anything *a priori* is unfounded, and we need no independent means of establishing that our belief is genuine *a priori* knowledge, because even if it is not genuine knowledge, *a priori* it remains.

This conclusion depends, however, on all *a priori* knowledge consisting of knowledge of the facts in the domains of the formal sciences. This seems plausible enough, on its face, inasmuch as it would imply that *a priori* knowledge is concerned with non-empirical facts. I shall, for the moment, put off asking whether all *a priori* knowledge does, in fact, consist of knowledge of the facts in the domains of formal sciences (as Katz understands the formal sciences). More significant is the fact that even if Katz is right about this, he would seem simply to have evaded, or answered by fiat, the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

empiricist claim that it looks as though claims to *a priori* knowledge can be defeated by empirical considerations. Katz claims that we could be wrong about what we know, but to the extent that what we think we know *a priori* is justified (even if it is in fact false), its justification is *a priori*, and is only defeasible through further *a priori* considerations.

Though Katz does not develop this claim further, it appears to be undermined by the case of the status of Euclidean geometry. It would appear to have been empirically discovered that Euclidean geometry cannot be known *a priori* to be the necessarily true science of actual space, since it was demonstrated not to be the science of actual space by the replacement of Newtonian mechanics with Einstein's general theory of relativity. If Katz is right, then we could *only* have known *a priori* that Kant's epistemology did not warrant his conclusions concerning the necessity of truths concerning the structure of pure cognition. Katz could reply that while Einstein's general theory of relativity is clearly an empirical theory, it is not this theory that requires us to abandon Euclidean geometry as the science of actual space, but the principle of non-contradiction (along with other logical principles): observation gives us reason to believe that space is not Euclidean only because we *infer* from these observations that Euclidean geometry as a theory of actual space requires predictions about the structure of actual space that are not borne out in the event. It is not Einstein, then, but the principle of non-contradiction that tells us that space cannot be both Euclidean and non-Euclidean. Such inferences require logical principles that are themselves known *a priori*; therefore, *a priori* beliefs are revisable only in light of further pure ratiocination, as Katz claims.

The difficulty with this line of reply is, of course, that it either threatens to collapse the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge altogether, or fails to

address the problem. To say that our beliefs about the structure of actual space are *a priori* because we must appeal to *a priori* principles when revising them would make it difficult to imagine which of our beliefs are not *a priori*. On the other hand, if Katz wishes to claim that, in the end, our (supposedly) *a priori* belief about the structure of actual space was revised only in light of other (genuinely) *a priori* principles, then this simply would be to ignore the apparent contribution of empirical observation to the need for belief revision in the first place. This would leave our other (putatively) genuine *a priori* principles as vulnerable as the supposedly *a priori* Kantian claim.

Katz does not, however, develop this reply any further, and it seems difficult to imagine how he could, so long as he hopes to maintain both that all *a priori* knowledge consists of facts within the domains of purely formal sciences and that *a priori* knowledge is only revisable in light of further pure ratiocination. I shall return to the question whether genuine *a priori* knowledge can be refuted (or even challenged) by empirical observation (and to the question whether we can ever be secure in the belief that apparent *a priori* awareness is genuine), in the next two chapters. Katz's answer to the empiricist's claim that if *a priori* belief is revisable then it is doing little or no epistemic work, is that appealing to *a priori* beliefs about the nature of abstract objects that constitute the objects of the formal (foundational) sciences plays an indispensable role in the best epistemological account of our knowledge of mathematics, linguistics, and logic. Obviously, much depends upon this aspect of Katz's position, but I shall return to this matter later in the chapter. For now, let us consider Katz's replies to the remaining empiricist arguments against the existence of *a priori* awareness.

Katz's answer to the empiricist's claim that empiricism can provide a satisfactory account of the apparent necessary truth of certain statements is straightforward and devastating. Quine's holistic account of the meaning and adequacy of the statements of our natural scientific framework is almost universally regarded as the best contender for a successful account of the apparent necessity of the truth of certain statements, and Katz argues that Quine's account is incoherent.

Quine holds that no statement is in fact immune from revision. This is certainly consistent with thoroughgoing empiricism, since we could presumably have no means of knowing in advance of all possible future experience, what will stand up to repeated attempts at disconfirmation and what won't. This conclusion, however, would seem to conflict with our intuition that some elementary statements – such as the principle of non-contradiction, or that $1=1$ – are certain to such a high degree that we cannot imagine them being false, and that they are in fact necessarily true; nothing – no experience of any kind – could conflict with such statements, or cause us to give them up or alter them. Quine concedes that such statements are not generally susceptible to direct observational disconfirmation, and that it is very unlikely that we will give up these sorts of elementary statements, but he maintains that it is not impossible. Quine's epistemology is coherentist, and he pictures the whole of our (natural scientific) belief structure as consisting of a web or network of statements, some of which are relatively closer to direct empirical experience (and thus more susceptible to direct disconfirmation), and some of which are relatively further from this experience, including those that constitute our apparatus for making sense of and organizing that experience – mathematics and logic. The statements, of mathematics and logic for instance, that are closer to the center of our

framework are not only less susceptible to direct disconfirmation but are also generally less likely to be revised; since their organizing function is so central to the framework as a whole, the cost of revoking or revising these statements is quite high, and any disruption among these statements will produce framework-wide disruption, so we rationally choose to avoid paying such a price, or inducing such disruptions, by making adjustments elsewhere in the framework.¹⁷ Thus, elementary beliefs are not in fact unrevisable, though they may appear to be because of their role in our framework of beliefs about the world. To say that they are necessarily true is wrong, but it is understandable that our intuitions would deliver this judgment. To say that they are necessarily true is, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, only a slightly hysterical way of saying that it's very hard to imagine giving them up, and very unlikely that we will have to.

Katz argues as follows. To regard every statement as revisable, we must, presumably, include even the statements that govern revisability and the process of revision. In that case, the principle of non-contradiction is revisable, however unlikely it is that it may require revision in light of recalcitrant experience. To argue that any

¹⁷ One objection to Quine's picture that Katz does not exploit here, is that while its accuracy as a description of our actual theory-selecting practices is part of what makes it so attractive, there can be no warrant for regarding the picture as a normative account of our theory-selecting practices, as Quine seems to assume. This is because Quine's thoroughgoing empiricism implies that we can say nothing informative about the extent to which our actual practice of striking a balance between permitting system-wide disruptions and making more minor adjustments is rational, since there is no way to know or even to talk about this balance being appropriate to the way the world is. At best, Quine could claim that it is rational according to current standards of rationality, or that our actual practice seems best given our other beliefs about the world, as Quine does in fact seem to say, for instance, in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." In that case, however, nothing recommends our current practices, other than the practices themselves; and, what is worse, nothing recommends Quine's epistemology as anything other than a description of our current views about theory choice. It certainly cannot be said to be rational in any normative sense. (As Jaegwon Kim puts the matter, in "What is Naturalized Epistemology," "for epistemology to go out of the business of justification is for it to go out of business." (Kim 2000, p. 306).) This is entirely consistent with Quine's naturalized epistemology, to the extent that it is (obviously) non-normative, but the point seems to have been missed by those (including Quine) who recommend Quine's epistemology on the grounds that adopting it will lead to knowledge. The only reasons we have for thinking that this is true are the same reasons we have for thinking that our account of knowledge is a good one: namely, that it's the one we endorse. This is the epistemic equivalent of patting ourselves on the back and calling it acclaim.

statement or set of statements stands in need of revision, however, we must be able to appeal to the fact that this statement (or these statements) conflict with – that is, contradict – other statements that we would like to make in order to accommodate some new experience(s). If one of the statements that we are considering revising or jettisoning is the principle of non-contradiction itself, then either the argument that supports its abandonment is invalid, in which case we have no argument for its abandonment, or it cannot be abandoned (so that the argument may go through), in which case it is not revisable. Either way, at least some statements are not revisable, on pain of the consequence that we no longer have a decidable process of revision. As Katz puts the matter: “It might make sense to contemplate replacing every plank in Neurath’s boat, but it makes no sense to contemplate replacing the basic principle of ship construction that says that there have to be planks between us and the water.”¹⁸ In fact, as Katz points out, this argument supports the following general epistemological principle: “There is no actual epistemology that says that everything *including itself* is revisable.”¹⁹

Quine could reply that this sort of argument is ungenerous to his position and unimaginative about the possibilities for belief-revision. If we needed to revise the principle of non-contradiction, it’s not as though we would replace it with the counter-principle: “Two contradictory statements can be true at the same time.” We would replace it with something we maybe at this point can’t even imagine – but this is precisely the point; the fact that we can’t imagine its being false is a result of our inability to imagine what would replace it. We could, however, replace it with some loosened constraint on statement conflict, or some coherence-preserving constraint, or who knows

¹⁸ Katz 2000, p. 74.

¹⁹ Ibid., italics added.

what. To say that we could not replace it, however, is unsupported, historically and logically.

Firstly, it should be noted that this statement of Quine's position requires that we could not abandon the principle of non-contradiction, but only modify it.²⁰ Secondly, this reply would seem to suggest that Quine's epistemology still needs some sort of principle of coherence, which seems fairly obvious and uninteresting until we notice that this result supports the principle stated above. Quine's epistemology cannot be *universally* revisable, but it must be to maintain its thoroughgoing empiricism. Thirdly, the claim that history shows that every belief or statement can in principle be revised has already been answered in part above, and will be answered in more detail below. Fourthly, the fact that we can't now imagine the principle of non-contradiction being false, considering that human beings have never been able to imagine this,²¹ as much supports rationalism as it supports Quine's thoroughgoing empiricism.

Katz's conclusion, and mine, is that Quine's account of the appearance of necessary truth enjoyed by some statements fails, and that its failure is a result of the fact that some statements are unrevisable, and are therefore necessarily true.

²⁰ Even Hilary Putnam argues that there must be at least one *a priori* truth: namely, a somewhat weakened version of the principle of non-contradiction that states that not every statement and its negation can be true (Putnam 1983d). To deny this principle, Putnam points out, is to give up on rationality itself. BonJour makes a similar point in *In Defense of Pure Reason*, when he observes that abandoning all appeals to any *a priori* principles would amount "in effect to intellectual suicide" (BonJour 1999, p. 5). Of course Putnam draws from this observation different conclusions concerning the nature and ground of rationality than I, and BonJour, do.

²¹ I must qualify what I mean by this somewhat sweeping generalization. Of course dialetheists argue that some contradictions might in fact be true, or that, within a certain scope (or within certain paraconsistent logics), some contradictions might be permissible or acceptable. (See, for instance, Beall 2004.) But, again, this claim is clearly not equivalent to an outright rejection or repudiation of the principle of non-contradiction, and I maintain that such an outright rejection or repudiation is in fact inconceivable, as Katz argues, even if the principle of non-contradiction could be (or should be, or must be) modified in some way(s).

Turning to the other of the two dispensability arguments, then, Katz answers the claim that we can account for all of our knowledge without appealing to *a priori* awareness or knowledge by saying that a rationalist epistemology offers the best account of knowledge in the formal sciences: logic, mathematics, and linguistics. This claim has at least some initial plausibility in light of the fact that thoroughgoing empiricism seems incapable of explaining away necessary truth. As was noted above, however, the rationalist still owes the empiricist an account of our knowledge of mathematical or logical truths (for instance) as *a priori* knowledge. Katz presents such an account.

He says that “a particular realism is an ontological position in the foundations of a particular formal science,” which means that, for Katz, rationalism is an account of our knowledge of the objects in that domain (or those domains – however far formal science extends). He maintains that the best account of our knowledge in logic, mathematics, and linguistics is a rationalist account that clarifies the nature of our cognitive contact with the abstract objects of whose structure and structural relations knowledge in the formal foundations of these sciences consists. Knowledge in the natural sciences (including “mathematics proper, logic proper, and linguistics proper”), then, while partly empirical, also rests on (or relies upon) these formal foundations. The formal sciences are “branches of the philosophy of science, concerned with a philosophical understanding of the results in the particular sciences proper.”

Katz argues that such a realistic rationalism is the *best* account of our knowledge in mathematics, logic, and linguistics because, roughly, there are necessary truths (as we saw above) – namely, certain logical, mathematical and linguistic necessary truths – and our only serious prospect for being able to make sense of the possibility of our knowing

that a statement expresses a necessary truth is rationalism. His argument receives further support, as we have seen, from his critique of empiricist accounts of the appearance of necessity enjoyed by certain statements, and of empiricist accounts of knowledge generally, as well as from a critique of empiricist objections to rationalism on the grounds that it is incomprehensible, mystical, and lacking examples of *a priori* knowledge (this last critique to be considered shortly). Katz also seems to think that his realistic rationalism is the best account of philosophical knowledge in general (despite the almost stipulative nature of his pronouncement that metaphysical realism is “an ontological position in the foundations of a particular formal science”), and he considers the prospects of extending his project to cover “philosophical knowledge wholesale.” He concedes that “the initial problem in extending this account to philosophical knowledge is that philosophy is not for the most part a study of abstract objects.” I would say that the bigger problem is that some of Katz’s characterizations of the general nature of philosophical inquiry equate it with formal science as he understands that term, while some do not. Thus, it would seem both trivial and non-trivial to extend his account to the rest of philosophy. Moreover, if philosophy is “not for the most part a study of abstract objects,” then the “initial problem” of extending his realistic rationalism also seems to be an insurmountable problem. Worse still, even his most generous characterizations of philosophy and of rationalism are too narrow, as we shall see. Katz is at pains to differentiate his realistic rationalism from Quine’s thoroughgoing empiricism (that also acknowledges abstract objects), but his only real disagreement with Quine is, at bottom, over whether our knowledge of abstract objects is *a priori* or *a posteriori*. Katz’s view is that rationalism and empiricism are simply opposing approaches to providing a

satisfactory account of scientific knowledge and practice, and that rationalism is established so long as it is preferable to every available empiricist account of knowledge. This position is of course too weak to meet our demands. Let us begin, however, with Katz's account of our awareness of abstract objects.

Katz begins by noting, quite correctly, that the empiricist's demand for a comprehensible account of *a priori* awareness begs the question against the rationalist to the extent that it consists of a demand for an account that explains *a priori* awareness in terms of sensory contact with reality itself. This begs the question because it is essential to the rationalist's position that *a priori* awareness is not sensory awareness.²² Since this is so, no account of *a priori* awareness can be formulated in terms of sensory awareness, but the demand for such an account rules out the possibility of *a priori* awareness without a hearing, on the assumption that any comprehensible account of awareness of any kind will have to be spelled out in sensory terms. Katz argues that the empiricist demand for a causal account of *a priori* awareness is question-begging in precisely this way, because to demand a causal account is to demand an account rendered in terms of sensory contact or awareness. Of course, this assumes that causation is a purely empirical affair, and that reality as it is in itself (or abstract objects, according to Katz's preferred ontology) is causally inert.²³ Katz indeed insists that abstract objects are causally inert, but his insistence is grounded on his assumption that causation is an empirical affair, so this insistence cannot amount to an argument for the assumption. Such an assumption is entirely consistent with a Kantian or a Humean epistemology, but it is not just clearly correct, and Katz nowhere argues for it, despite the fact that he explicitly rejects both

²² I hesitate to say that it is supersensory awareness for reasons that shall become clear presently.

²³ Or that the notion of cause does not apply to reality as it is in itself.

Humean and Kantian epistemology. He takes other rationalists to task for offering an essentially empiricist account of *a priori* awareness by offering a causal account, but this accusation rests on his assumption, and while it sometimes seems clear that he has successfully indicted rationalists for sliding over into empiricism, it is not clear that a causal account of *a priori* awareness must be empiricist by definition. For instance, Katz accuses Plato of proposing a causal pre-natal account of *a priori* awareness in the *Meno*, but later notes that Plato “characterized the Forms as atemporal, incorporeal, *nonsensible*, and transcendent.”²⁴ If they are non-sensible, then why is a causal account of contact with the forms empiricist (or even coherent, given Katz’s insistence that a causal account is a sensory account)? The point is that it is not clear why or whether we should regard a causal account of *a priori* awareness as necessarily an account rendered in terms that surrender to the empiricist.²⁵

Katz does, however, also rightly criticize empiricists who object to the very idea of *a priori* awareness on the grounds that such awareness would require a sort of mental power that seems almost magical, if not mystical, in its operation. Katz quotes Dale Gottlieb as saying that “abstract entities are mysterious and must be avoided at all costs,” Hartry Field as saying that the rationalist must “postulate some aphysical connection, some mysterious grasping” and Charles Chihara as saying that appealing to rational intuition is “like appealing to experiences vaguely described as ‘mystical experiences’ to justify belief in the existence of God.”²⁶ Katz’s reply is that something’s being

²⁴ Katz 2000, p. 124; italics added.

²⁵ I shall return to this issue in Chapters Seven and Eight.

²⁶ Katz 2000, p. 32. I have often heard it said that realists are really just theists in disguise, that they harbor a “desire for God,” or wish to preserve the idea of a “God’s eye view” or a “view from nowhere” that would underwrite the comforting thought that nature has a plan, or a design, or a rationally discernable order, that can be surveyed from the appropriate height. (Maria Lugones 1994 adds one more: the realist, or at least the monist, is a “lover of purity.”) I will not deny that there are similarities between some

mysterious is not the same thing as its being mystical. *A priori* awareness is mysterious, to be sure, but philosophy is, as Katz points out, “full of such mysteries.” The charge of mysticism, he says, is unwarranted, because mysticism “involves the claim to have a means of attaining knowledge beyond our natural cognitive faculties,” and “those who cry ‘mysticism,’ ‘superstition’ and the like perhaps need to be reminded of the fact that our sensory faculties do not exhaust those faculties.”

This is altogether too easy. Presumably, empiricists would admit that we have mental ratiocinative faculties, but this does not settle the matter. They do not need to be reminded that we have faculties other than our five senses and our ability to calculate, they need to be *convinced* that we do. This is precisely why they cry “mysticism!”: they maintain that to claim any sort of awareness beyond our five senses and our ability to calculate is to claim that we have “a means of attaining knowledge beyond our natural cognitive faculties.” Moreover, the fact that philosophy is full of such mysteries is cold comfort by itself; some philosophical “mysteries” really do just consist of poorly framed questions about the natural world that science could handle if properly understood. Why should we have confidence that the idea of *a priori* awareness is not like this? Katz’s argument is far too thinly developed.

versions of realism and some versions of Jewish and Christian theology. Nevertheless, this is not an argument against realism but a *diagnosis* of the realist that is meant to explain how he or she has been led so far from good sense. The idea is that the realist wants something that sophisticated and advanced contemporary thought shows cannot be had, and that the realist is just hanging on to this outmoded world-view because it seems comforting, despite the fact that he or she would be better off facing up to the indifference of the universe and growing out of this attachment to the sort of superstition that was the hallmark of humanity’s childhood. This is, of course, the old trick of defeating your opponents by declaring them psychologically deviant and in need of therapy, not further arguments. The assumption seems to be that the arguments against the possibility of realism are so telling that only irrational persons could fail to be persuaded by them. As I have shown, however, the arguments are neither telling nor persuasive.

It can, however, be improved. Firstly, empiricists who say such things as that rationalists are mystics or must appeal to some sort of magical mental grasping are making rationalism out to be a straw man. Not one of the most well-known rationalists holds such a ridiculous position. Plato seems to have assumed that there was an already established correspondence between mind and reality (à la Parmenides). Aristotle may have been the first proponent of representationalism, and most rationalists since then have cloven to something like representationalism, which is hardly mysticism, whatever its other faults may be. It is, in fact, only in the wake of the Humean arguments against the possibility of representationalism being underwritten by a secure metaphysics that empiricists have begun to regard *a priori* awareness as “mystical.”

Secondly, to say that the sort of connection to reality required by *a priori* awareness is magical or smacks of superstition or seems reminiscent of revealed knowledge of God’s existence is merely rhetorical grandstanding on the part of the empiricist. The idea seems to be this: if you think that *a priori* awareness is possible, you must think that we possess cognitive faculties that are capable of delivering information about reality other than our five senses and our ability to calculate; but this is radically out of joint with the current scientific consensus, and seems reminiscent of pre-scientific superstitions involving talk of occult “mental powers.” Thus, rationalists are not really participants in contemporary philosophical discourse about mathematical knowledge, and rationalism is clearly not a serious candidate for an account of mathematical knowledge. Perhaps we can’t even talk to them. Of course, it doesn’t matter whether rationalism appears similar to talk of occult mental powers, or even if it derives from such talk. The question is what rationalists can do with it now.

On the other hand, the empiricist is entirely right to say that the rationalist must produce a comprehensible account of *a priori* awareness. The empiricist's guess is that the rationalist cannot produce a comprehensible account, since the only modes of awareness we understand are our five senses and our ability to calculate, and it's hard to see what else there could be (mind rays?). This is not, as in the case of the principle of non-contradiction, however, hard to see because it is in fact impossible. There is no metaphysical or logical or grammatical incoherence or impossibility in the idea of additional means of awareness. I concede that the idea of non-sensory awareness of aspects of reality seems unlikely (to say the least) and inexplicable if we assume a pluralist metaphysics. But then, if rationalism seems to be the best way to account for the fact of necessary truth, perhaps we should reconsider our metaphysics. I have already offered an argument against representationalism, but further development of this suggestion will have to wait until chapter eight. I will there try to make the possibility of *a priori* awareness seem much more plausible than it now does. For now, we should turn to Katz's account of *a priori* awareness.

* * *

Katz's account of *a priori* awareness is profoundly unenlightening. He appeals to Gödel, who says that "mathematical intuition cannot be associated with actions of certain things upon our sense organs, or with something purely subjective, as Kant asserted," and that rational intuition "may be due to another kind of relationship between us and reality." This is, frankly, lame. I use the word in the clinical sense. To begin with, the

“may be due” portion of Gödel’s statement is a bit distressing. As rationalists, we like to just come right out and say “is due.” What is worse, however, is the characterization of our non-sensory relationship to reality: there is none. This is tantamount to Einstein saying that since Newtonian mechanics does not account for the invariance of the speed of light, some other theory of space and time must account for it. Katz’s realistic rationalism is long on realism but short on rationalism. A number of problems flow from this gap in Katz’s position, and although it seems like a colossal oversight, we can see why Katz thinks that it is not.

To begin with, though Katz insists that a Kantian rationalism will not do, because Kant’s psychologistic rationalism only explains why we take some truths to be metaphysically necessary, not why they are metaphysically necessary, his failure to provide a fuller account of *a priori* awareness and a secure metaphysics leave him scarcely more able to explain the metaphysical necessity of truths than Kant. After all, without any assurance that his speculative metaphysics is accurate, it is open to the empiricist to claim that our knowledge of elementary mathematical and logical statements consists of our treatment of the statements as axiomatic, and their ranging over constructed abstract entities. Without an account of *a priori* awareness, we do not in fact know that elementary mathematical and logical statements are metaphysically necessary, and Katz’s realistic rationalism at best explains why taking them to be metaphysically necessary would be preferable to taking them to be axiomatic.

This, however, is because, as was noted earlier, it is Katz’s view that the job of epistemology is to explain, not the possibility of knowledge generally, or even the possibility of knowledge in the sciences, but the *fact* of knowledge in the sciences. This

is why Katz does not trouble himself overmuch about providing an account of *a priori* awareness, and why he does not even address the question of Cartesian skepticism until nearly the end of *Realistic Rationalism*: he thinks that we cannot help but beg the skeptical question in the philosophy of science, and that the dispute between rationalism and empiricism is simply a dispute over which account of scientific knowledge best fits the facts. This severely limits both the scope and the value of Katz's rationalism.

If, according to Katz, a particular realism is "an ontological position in the foundations of a particular formal science" – namely, the ontological position that the domain of that science is populated by abstract objects – what is general realism? Katz says that "general realism is realism in general. It makes the indefinite claim that there are abstract objects."²⁷ If this is right, then there is no hope whatever of extending Katz's realistic rationalism to cover the whole of philosophy. As Katz himself points out, "philosophy can be about anything."²⁸ Katz's claim about general realism is false, as is his view of epistemology generally. Philosophy can be about anything, and is in fact about everything. What we have seen in previous chapters is that epistemology is concerned, at bottom, with the question of how we can know anything at all, and metaphysics is concerned with the nature and structure of reality as it is in itself – that is, with ultimate ontology. Their relationship is that epistemology explains how it is possible for us to have knowledge of reality – scientific knowledge, but also metaphysical knowledge generally – not merely knowledge of abstract objects in a formal science (unless it can be shown that all metaphysical knowledge reduces to such knowledge, but Katz does not undertake to show this). As we saw in the last chapter, traditional

²⁷ Katz 2000, p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 190.

metaphysical questions cannot simply be dismissed as meaningless or unintelligible, and questions such as “Why something rather than nothing?”, “What is Being?”, “Is reality plural or singular?” seem to be clear candidates for metaphysical inquiry.

Katz’s only reply, it would seem, would be to say that we might be able to get closer to answering these questions by examining their linguistic structure. Katz wisely does not subscribe to representationalism as his epistemological account of *a priori* awareness, and he rejects Kantianism, but he shifts the fundamental metaphysical and epistemological issues by missing the fact that representationalism has been the problem, and by picking up where Frege left off, with an ontology of non-Fregean intentional objects. Katz’s intentional objects are non-Fregean because they play no role in a theory of reference. Katz notes that this move enables him to evade the indeterminacy arguments of Quine and Wittgenstein, since these arguments are aimed primarily at Fregean intentional objects and the role they play in the theory of reference. What Katz doesn’t seem to have noticed, however, is that Frege tied his theory of senses to the theory of reference in order to reduce epistemology to the philosophy of language – in order, in other words, that logicism could be a successor theory to Kantian epistemology. By snipping the connection between sense and referent, Katz likewise snips the connection between his formal scientific ontology and our knowledge of the world. It is not clear, for instance, how formal knowledge in the “foundations” of mathematics serves to underpin natural knowledge in mathematics proper, since Katz nowhere thinks to say how tokens of numbers are tokens of their formal ontological types.²⁹

²⁹ The fact that abstract and concrete objects co-exist in the same world, as Katz hastens to insist, does nothing to solve this problem. Indeed, it makes the problem worse, since, if abstract objects co-exist with concrete objects, one will want to know: where, exactly, are these things? It is precisely to avoid this sort

Even though Katz's view of linguistics as a formal science is that its domain consists of abstract (linguistic) objects, this proposal strikes me as scarcely an advance over linguistic analysis, or the idea that philosophy does not explain the possibility of our knowledge or produce new knowledge, but merely helps us to clarify what we already know. Suffice it to say that I find it highly unlikely that, if there is a fact of the matter concerning questions such as "Is reality singular or plural," the facts consist of facts about the language in which I ask it. Thus, as it stands, Katz's realistic rationalism is not a particularly good candidate for a speculative metaphysics, and he does not offer to secure it.

Katz acknowledges that nothing he has said in *Realistic Rationalism* secures his epistemology from attack on the grounds that it does not secure access to the ontology he propounds, but he offers some considerations that are meant to meliorate this situation. For one thing, he says, the empiricist, appearances aside, is not in any more secure a position with respect to skepticism than is the rationalist. It may seem that by turning their backs on the skeptic, empiricists have defused the skeptical argument, but this is not so. We have already arrived at this same conclusion, inasmuch as it is incumbent upon us all to provide a comprehensive metaphysics. Katz, however, also points out that "the Humean [skeptical] problem resurfaces as a problem of what right we have to think that [our] inductive practices ... are reliable in the long run."³⁰ This is an important point. He adds that while we cannot answer the skeptic, we are at least on the right track, since rationalism is the only epistemology that can have any hope of answering the Cartesian skeptic. He points out that "Cartesian and Humean skepticism show ... that, if there is an

of problem that Plato is sometimes taken to have postulated a "separate realm" for the forms. The idea is that if forms are atemporal, non-spatial, and eternal, then they do not exist in our phenomenal world.

argument that can meet Cartesian or Human skepticism, it cannot be one based on experience.”³¹ This is also an important point.

In the end, however, Katz contents himself with the following. He says, without offering any argument, that to answer the Cartesian skeptic, “we would have to prove the existence of God.”³² Since this very probably cannot be done, we’ll need another approach, and Katz offers no reasons for thinking that there isn’t one (other than that answering the skeptic will be very, very hard, if it even can be done). The fact that if we go down, we all go down together, empiricists and rationalists alike, is, however, only satisfying if we are already convinced, as Katz is, that the important questions are the “internal” questions of whether our standards support the claim that we have knowledge, and what the best account is of these standards. This is not the basic epistemological issue. We feel confident that we have knowledge, of course, but to the extent that this confidence rests on our own standards, then our confidence amounts to little more than our feeling pretty darn proud of ourselves. The epistemological question is: how is it possible for us to have any knowledge at all? Even Descartes thought it unlikely that it would turn out to be impossible to rule out the existence of an evil deceiver who

³⁰ Katz 2000, p. 189. See footnote seventeen, above, for a discussion of a similar point.

³¹ Ibid., p. 203.

³² Ibid., p. 204, n. 4. Katz observes, however, that Robert Nozick has shown that even establishing the existence of a benevolent God would not do the trick. Nozick (1981) argues that even if we were created by a benevolent God, so long as we hold God’s motives to be inscrutable (as Descartes does), we cannot know that such a good God does not “have his own reasons for deceiving us.” God might, Nozick claims, “deceive us temporarily” for “a period which includes all of our life thus far (but not the afterlife),” or might even “be motivated to allow another powerful ‘demon’ to deceive and dominate us” (p. 202). These do indeed seem to be legitimate possibilities. I submit, however, that if we could demonstrate the existence of a benevolent God, then we would have reason to believe that any divine deception must serve a long-run (benevolent) purpose, and that this would, in itself, be enough to defeat Cartesian skepticism – though the intended certification of our knowledge of the external world might in this case be ultimately disappointed. Should we lose heart? I don’t see why we should. Nozick has here simply demonstrated the extent of the difficulty of defeating Cartesian skepticism with respect to our knowledge of the external world.

systematically distorts our sensory awareness. Are we right to feel so confident? Why?

I hope to draw nearer to answers to these questions in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 7

LAURENCE BONJOUR'S DEFENSE OF PURE REASON

Though J. J. Katz's realistic rationalism did not provide us with a secure metaphysics (or even an adequate speculative metaphysics) and an acceptable rationalism, Katz's arguments did provide us with (at least partial) answers to the empiricist arguments against the actual existence of any *a priori* awareness or knowledge. Some of these answers require further development, but the beginnings of an answer to each of the three empiricist arguments¹ are now available, and I take the first dispensability argument to have been answered pretty decisively in favor of rationalism. Laurence Bonjour defends what he calls a "moderate rationalism," in the course of which defense he offers arguments that, as we shall see, will assist us in refining and reinforcing our answers to the inductive and the second dispensability arguments. Bonjour's moderate rationalism will, as we shall also see, prove to be only somewhat more satisfactory than Katz's realistic rationalism – which is to say not very – and it will not meet our demands for an acceptable epistemology. Bonjour's rationalism will, however, point the way to invaluable insights regarding the form that any acceptable epistemology must take.

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¹ As a reminder, the three empiricist arguments against the actual existence of any *a priori* awareness or knowledge are: the inductive argument that many claims to *a priori* awareness or knowledge have historically turned out to be mistaken; the first dispensability argument that empiricism can perfectly well account for the apparent necessity of the truth of some statements; and the second dispensability argument that an acceptable empiricist account of human knowledge can be offered that need not ever appeal to *a*

BonJour, in his *In Defense of Pure Reason*, offers what might seem to be a surprising reply to the empiricist's inductive argument against the actual existence of any *a priori* awareness or knowledge. He claims that *a priori* awareness or knowledge is fallible and corrigible, and thus not immune to rational revision. This may seem somewhat surprising for two reasons. Firstly, as BonJour himself observes: "it is a familiar fact that an overwhelming majority of the historical proponents of rationalist conceptions of *a priori* justification and knowledge regarded such knowledge as *certain* – where the primary content of the notion of certainty was that a proposition that is justified *a priori*, via rational insight, cannot fail to be true, that *a priori* justification is *infallible*."² Secondly, if *a priori* awareness or knowledge is fallible and corrigible, then, in the absence of any means of knowing when we are genuinely in possession of *a priori* knowledge, no claim to such knowledge could ultimately serve the function of securing our epistemological enterprise. This is indeed a worry, and BonJour does not, in the end, do enough to address it. We shall see, however, that the fallibility and corrigibility of (some) *a priori* awareness is neither so serious a problem as it would appear to be, nor so surprising as it might at first seem. In fact, the fallibility and corrigibility of *a priori* awareness go a long way toward explaining the apparent failure of rationalism historically, and also serve to illuminate the differences between *a priori* belief that is open to correction and belief that is not.

BonJour acknowledges that there are a number of apparent counterexamples to the supposed infallibility of *a priori* knowledge or awareness. In fact, he says that there are "at least three classes" of such counterexamples: the historical examples of apparently

priori awareness or knowledge of any kind whatever. See Chapter Six for a development of these arguments in somewhat greater detail.

necessarily true statements that were taken or claimed to be known *a priori* that turned out to be false; the claims to indubitable *a priori* knowledge on the part of rationalists down through the ages that have conflicted with one another; and the ordinary errors in judgment and calculation to which any of our beliefs is liable, including those that are supposed to be the result of direct rational insight or awareness (or the result of inferences or calculations involving the use of such supposed insights).³ BonJour further admits that we must, of course, account for these apparent counterexamples to preserve rationalism against the empiricist's inductive argument. What BonJour proposes, however, is that we break with the traditional view that *a priori* awareness is infallible, and adopt a more moderate rationalism, according to which *a priori* awareness or insight is both fallible and corrigible.

There are two problems with this proposal. Firstly, it does not initially seem to be any more promising than Katz's reply to the inductive argument. As we have seen, the problem is not that it is not open to us simply to say that statements that appeared to be knowable *a priori* but turned out to be false were not really cases of *a priori* knowledge in the first place; the problem is what we should do about the consequences for rationalism once we have said this. We glimpsed some of these consequences in the last chapter, and have already the beginnings of a solution. BonJour does not seem, however, to appreciate the potential gravity of these consequences, and seems to think that the adoption of a more moderate rationalism by itself constitutes the bulk of the answer to the empiricist's inductive argument. BonJour does address some of the difficulties generated by the concession that not all apparent instances of *a priori* awareness will turn out to be

² BonJour 1999, p. 110.

³ Ibid., p. 111.

actual instances of *a priori* awareness, though his discussion, like Katz's, needs elaboration. We will consider BonJour's attempt to address these difficulties shortly. Let us, however, first turn to the other problem with BonJour's proposal.

BonJour asserts that we must "concede, contrary to the main historical tradition, that what appears subjectively to be [an *a priori*] seeing or grasping or apprehending may fail to be one, most strikingly in the case where the proposition that seemed to be necessary turns out to be false."⁴ This of course implies that, according to the main rationalist tradition, what appears subjectively to be an *a priori* seeing or grasping or apprehending or whatever *is* (always?) in fact objectively such an *a priori* seeing or grasping or apprehending or whatever. The problem with this claim is that it is simply false. Few if any among even the most strident rationalists held such a view of *a priori* awareness. Descartes did not. He held, famously, that beliefs arrived at through clear and distinct perception are infallible, because God would not allow us to be deceived about anything we could perceive clearly and distinctly. Even so, Descartes allowed that we might be mistaken as to whether a particular perception is clear and distinct, and that careful direction and training of one's intellect are required to eliminate these sorts of errors of judgment. He observes that "the giving of our assent to something unclear happens because we imagine that we clearly perceived it on some occasion," and adds that "we must concentrate our mind's eye totally upon the most insignificant and easiest of matters, and dwell on them long enough to acquire the habit of intuiting the truth distinctly and clearly."⁵ Indeed, the mere fact that Descartes singled out one particular sort of cognition – clear and distinct perception – as constituting genuine rational

⁴ Ibid., pp. 15-16, n. 18.

⁵ Descartes 1988, pp. 174 and 171.

intuition (as opposed, presumably, to apparent rational intuition) suggests that he was not only aware of such a distinction but endorsed it. There are a number of famous difficulties associated with how we are to distinguish clear and distinct perception from other sorts of cognition, but the point is that Descartes proposed a criterion of genuineness for *a priori* awareness, which suggests that he knew that he needed one, and that he held that not all apparent *a priori* awareness is actual.

Plato, too, endorsed the distinction. He contents that there is genuine knowledge to be obtained about the nature of reality as such, and that this sort of knowledge can be achieved only through dialectic, if at all (and not through empirical observation as such), which is concerned with the intelligible as opposed to the sensible. He notes, however, in many places in the dialogues how difficult such knowledge is to obtain. A number of dialogues end in *aporia* – that is, in confusion – without a positive result. Moreover, in the *Republic*, Plato remarks that the highest knowledge to which one can aspire, after metaphorically leaving the cave of the shadows of the merely sensible – namely, knowledge of the purely intelligible – is at first no more certain and indubitable than is the perception we enjoy on first emerging into the sunlight after so many years spent in darkness. Plato says of the person who has just left the cave, that “he’d need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above,” and he makes it plain that this also applies to our journey beyond the bounds of sense.⁶ “In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty.”⁷ Plato does not think that everything we believe we know about reality as such is genuine knowledge, and he plainly thinks that genuine knowledge in this area is hard to come by,

⁶ Plato 1997b, 516a.

⁷ Ibid., 517b.

and requires years of careful thought, reflection and attention (not to mention dialectic!) to obtain.

Indeed, I suspect that the rationalist tradition is rather one of moderate rationalism than of radical rationalism, as Bonjour would have it. The only obviously plausible reasons anyone could even have for thinking that all apparent cases of *a priori* knowledge are bona fide cases of such knowledge, and that we could know that this is so, are that (1) our mental states and their contents are entirely transparent to us, including their inferential relations to one another, and that (2) the faculty we possess for generating such states never errs when reality as such is the only matter under consideration.⁸ These are pretty ambitious expectations for any epistemologist to have regarding human cognitive faculties, and the only apparently likely candidate for a rationalist whose expectations are this lofty would be Descartes, inasmuch as he is committed both to cognitive transparency and to the infallibility of clear and distinct perception. But, as we have seen, even Descartes does not accept (1) and (2). Thus, Bonjour's moderate rationalism should seem neither surprising nor novel.

It may fairly be argued that rationalists have often failed to devote much of their attention to developing the distinction between merely apparent *a priori* awareness and genuine *a priori* awareness, but this may be, as Bonjour notes, partly due to the fact that the existence of *a priori* awareness was largely taken for granted by most philosophers

⁸ Bonjour curiously does not even consider the holding of these reasons by other rationalists to be a possible explanation for what he takes to be the historical consensus that *a priori* awareness is infallible. Rather, he suggests that perhaps it was the fact that *a priori* beliefs are often beliefs about necessary truths that led rationalists to think that we could not be wrong about them. This is at least plausible, if we add, as Bonjour does not, that perhaps it was thought that beliefs about necessary truths could not be mistaken because such truths, and hence the truth of the belief that they are true, is guaranteed. Otherwise, this confusion would indeed involve a gross fallacy, as Bonjour puts it, but this alone should seem to be enough of a reason to doubt the explanation. Bonjour simply notes that while "such an explanation of a deeply

until Hume,⁹ so the absence of such a distinction was not regarded as a matter of serious concern. Moreover, rationalists' accounts of the proper means of attaining certain knowledge (and of correcting cognitive errors) could be taken to supply all that is needed in the way of a distinction between apparent and genuine *a priori* awareness. Indeed, this shall be our contention here: that once we have provided for the possibility of the purely *a priori* correction of *a priori* belief, and for the possibility of the identification of some *a priori* beliefs that are not revisable, we will have answered the empiricist's inductive argument. Let us return, then, to BonJour's discussion of both the fallibility and the corrigibility of *a priori* beliefs.

As we saw in the last chapter, Katz insists that genuine *a priori* awareness or belief can be neither challenged nor refuted by empirical considerations. Of course, he concedes that what was thought to be known *a priori*, but is in fact *a posteriori*, can be challenged and refuted by empirical considerations, but this does no damage to rationalism as such.¹⁰ What does threaten rationalism, however, as neither Katz nor BonJour seem sufficiently to appreciate, is the fact that, in such cases, the statement in question that was thought to be known *a priori* seemed to us to be *a priori*, and was in other respects indistinguishable from other supposedly genuine instances of *a priori* knowledge or belief. Concerning the (apparently empirical) defeat of Euclidean geometry, Hilary Kornblith observes that "the Newton-Einstein example is a clear case of empirical theorizing forcing a rational change in a belief which earlier had all the

entrenched historical claim is unsatisfying," he has "no better account to offer" (1999, p. 111). Of course, since there is no such historical consensus anyway, there is nothing that really needs explaining.

⁹ BonJour 1999, p. 17.

¹⁰ Excepting the erosion of confidence in rationalism, and in *a priori* awareness generally, provoked by salient instances of the abandonment of beliefs once thought to be *a priori*. I shall deal with this difficulty shortly.

hallmarks of a priority.”¹¹ If Katz is right in his claim that it should have been obvious, even in Kant’s time, that Kant’s epistemology did not really enable him to show that anything is *a priori* known to be necessarily true, then Kornblith is wrong about this. This is encouraging, given the salience of the example. Still, the question is whether claims such as Katz’s are generally or always true of cases of failed claims to *a priori* knowledge, since this would mean not only that no necessary truths had turned out to be false but also that no *a priori* awareness was actually involved (or overturned by experience). What reasons do we have then, if any, for thinking that genuine *a priori* belief cannot be challenged or refuted by experience?

Drawing upon Philip Kitcher’s discussion of *a priori* belief in his *The Nature of Mathematical Knowledge*, BonJour considers three possibilities: an *a priori* belief could be directly challenged by experience, theoretically challenged as a result of observation, or socially challenged by the relevant professional specialists (mathematicians, physicists, etc.) who reject it for reasons internal to their practice. BonJour begins by noting that in none of the standard cases is the purported *a priori* knowledge directly challenged or refuted by experience or observation. It’s not as though we just look and see that Euclidean geometry is not the science of actual space. What we see are a series of experimental results or empirical observations that, when coupled with our predictive expectations or certain other statements that form a part of our physical theory, suggest that our theory of actual space (or some part of it) is wrong. This, however, suggests that any theoretical or social challenge to our *a priori* belief posed by experience is indirect at best, and is in fact only prompted by the apparent conflict between observation and certain other theoretical commitments we already have. BonJour points out that the

¹¹ Kornblith 2000, p. 76.

conflict is only generated by an *inference from* our observation, and that “any such inference would have to rely, tacitly if not explicitly, on some underlying premises or principles of inference connecting the experience in question with this further result,” these premises or principles of inference themselves being, in the end, *a priori*.¹²

Observation gives us reason to think that (what we take to be) an *a priori* belief is false only in cases where the belief in question was not really *a priori* to begin with; in other words, genuine *a priori* awareness cannot be refuted or even challenged by empirical observations, because if it were, it would not be genuine *a priori* awareness after all.

Ultimately, logical and epistemic principles that are themselves known *a priori* are revisable (if at all) only in light of further *a priori* considerations. So long as at least some of our *a priori* beliefs can be demonstrated to be unrevisable, we need not worry that some of our other (putative) *a priori* beliefs may require revision in light of their coherence with certain of our empirical beliefs. It should still be troubling that certain beliefs that we had good reason to think were *a priori* turned out not to be *a priori* at all (and that still others may yet turn out not to be *a priori* as well), but at least in such cases we can be assured that no genuine *a priori* belief was overturned. Of course, the rationalist still owes the empiricist an argument for the claim that we do in fact know at least some logical and epistemic principles *a priori*, but we shall return to this issue below in the context of our discussion of the second dispensability argument. We must first address the question whether any of our *a priori* beliefs is in fact immune from revision. Even if our *a priori* beliefs are revisable, ultimately, only in light of other *a priori* beliefs, however, at least some of them must be entirely immune from revision if

¹² BonJour 1999, p. 122.

our metaphysics is to be anything other than speculative, and if our epistemology is to be comprehensive.

Kornblith observes, quite correctly, that

once the real possibility of error is recognized even for *a priori* claims, these too stand in need of justification by integration with one's other beliefs." He goes on to say that "the claims of reason no longer stand somehow outside the web [of belief], adjudicating once and for all what inferential moves are legitimate. Instead, they too are brought down to earth, forced to earn their epistemic worth just like any other claims, through integration with our total body of beliefs."¹³

In order for the appeal to *a priori* awareness or knowledge to accomplish its task of accounting for the very possibility of knowledge, and thus for our means of awareness of the furniture of the universe, at least some of our *a priori* awareness – namely, the portion that consists of the account of *a priori* awareness itself – must be impervious to error.

What is needed, in short, is some sort of foundationalism. Katz rejects this claim because he maintains that we need not answer the skeptic to claim that we have any knowledge at all, or any knowledge in the sciences or the foundations of the sciences. As we have seen, however, the basic epistemological question is not whether we have any knowledge at all, but is rather how knowledge is possible. If we fail to answer this question, or are incapable of answering it, then our evolving cognitive project can have no claim to the title "knowledge," our license to call any of our beliefs "knowledge" must be revoked, and the skeptic carries the day. The possibility of answering the basic epistemological question, however, is still open as things stand, and it is not answered by noting that we have knowledge in the sciences and the foundations of the sciences and by providing a

¹³ Kornblith 2000, p. 82.

plausible account (even the maximally plausible account) of what we can take scientists, mathematicians, linguists, and so on to be talking about when they practice their crafts.

BonJour seems to acknowledge, in some places, the need for a foundational account of *a priori* awareness, but he nowhere offers one in *In Defense of Pure Reason*. Quite apart from everything I have just said, there is another entirely conclusive reason why an account of *a priori* awareness or knowledge (or belief or justification) must be incorrigible and indefeasible: a system of *a priori* belief cannot be justified in virtue of its internal coherence, because “any conception of coherence, however restricted, will presuppose certain fundamental premises or principles that define the conception in question and cannot be assessed by appeal to it.”¹⁴ BonJour recognizes that any account of *a priori* awareness must be foundationalist, but he seems to think that his own account is foundationalist. He says that “a thoroughgoing coherence theory of *a priori* justification and knowledge is impossible, so that a theory of *a priori* justification must be, like the present one, essentially foundationalist in character.”¹⁵

It is not at all clear, however, why he takes his account in *In Defense of Pure Reason* to be foundationalist. Although he couches his account of *a priori* awareness in terms of a system of *a priori* beliefs, he nowhere identifies any specific *a priori* beliefs that we should take to be incorrigible. It is true that he often argues that logical principles should be taken to constitute *a priori* knowledge, and he argues that no argument could possibly proceed without them, but he does not say precisely which logical principles are

¹⁴ BonJour 1999, p. 118. This is similar to Katz’s dictum: “There is no actual epistemology that says that everything including itself is revisable” (2000, p. 74). Closer attention to his own dictum should have prompted Katz to modify and further develop his own account of the rational revisability of *a priori* beliefs.

¹⁵ Ibid. For another argument to the effect that any coherence theory of knowledge or justification must, in the end, rest or rely upon *a priori* principles that constrain or require its long-run stability, see BonJour 1985, pp. 169-188.

incorrigible, if any. As Kornblith and BonJour himself both point out, even if they are only revisable according to their coherence with other *a priori* beliefs, the fact that their warrant remains strictly *a priori*¹⁶ does not by itself entitle them to act as the adjudicators of all belief. Their coherence with our empirical beliefs will, in that case, also be a factor, and we could never have any reason in principle for preferring a revision of our total system that preserves *a priori* beliefs over one that preserves empirical beliefs. Moreover, BonJour does not, in the course of his discussion of the fallibility and corrigibility of *a priori* beliefs, have anything to say about which *a priori* beliefs are incorrigible, or how we could identify them.

BonJour does note the difficulty in identifying them, and in distinguishing between merely apparent and genuine *a priori* belief generally. Presumably genuine *a priori* belief would be incorrigible; the question is how we know when one of our apparent *a priori* beliefs (or our *a priori* awareness) is genuine. “If rational insight is indeed fallible,” BonJour observes, “then it is natural to think that some further, epistemically prior criterion or standard is needed in order to distinguish genuine rational insights from merely apparent ones.”¹⁷ The problem with this, as he immediately makes clear, is that “the need to appeal to such a criterion would deprive *a priori* insight of most or all of its cognitive value.” This is because “any such criterion or standard would itself have to be somehow justified; and only a little reflection will show that there is no possible way in which it could be justified without either impugning the *a priori* status of the claims that are justified by appeal to it (if it is justified empirically) or else being guilty of obvious circularity (if it is justified *a priori*).” There can be no useful epistemic

¹⁶ Or *au fond a priori*, at least.

¹⁷ BonJour, p. 115.

criterion that enables us to distinguish genuine from merely apparent *a priori* awareness. What is needed is a secure metaphysics that would underwrite both the possibility (and actuality) of incorrigible *a priori* awareness, and our comprehensive rationalist epistemology along with it. BonJour does not offer a secure metaphysics in *In Defense of Pure Reason*, though he does offer a speculative one. I shall consider this speculative metaphysics below. We will not have provided a thorough or a satisfactory answer to the empiricist's inductive argument until we have produced a secure metaphysics. This discussion must, however, wait until we have considered BonJour's reply to the second dispensability argument.

BonJour offers no reply to the first dispensability argument, although it may be that he thinks he doesn't need one. He does not argue, as does Katz, that radical empiricism à la Quine is incoherent and therefore incapable of accounting for the apparent necessity of certain truths. Rather, he argues that Quine's empiricism is wholly inadequate as an epistemology, which would presumably imply that it is not a serious contender as an account of apparent necessary truth, or of knowledge generally.¹⁸ Thus, he proposes, in effect, to answer the first dispensability argument by answering the second. He begins by noting that Quine's web metaphor, as it is presented in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" begs the question against the rationalist and against the possibility of *a priori* knowledge.

¹⁸ BonJour argues that Quine's epistemology is wholly inadequate, however, because it leads immediately to a nearly total skepticism, though he considers the possibility that Quine would not have shrunk from this result, and may even have intended it. In that case, however, it could be argued that skepticism is the best we can do, and though Quine's epistemology would be disappointing, it would not be unacceptable. Moreover, it might then offer the only available and plausible account of apparent necessary truth, so that showing that Quine's position leads to skepticism answers neither dispensability argument, strictly speaking. It seems to me beyond question that Quine did not *intend* his epistemology to be skeptical, though of course it might be. BonJour's argument, though, even if it is correct, only does damage to

What follows from the Duhemian view is only that the revisions prompted by recalcitrant experience need not be confined to the observation periphery [of our web of beliefs], that is, that *the demands of experience* can equally well be satisfied by revisions in the non-observational interior, so that there can be no experiential test of a single sentence in isolation. But to conclude from this that any sentence can be rationally given up ... it must be assumed that *epistemic rationality is concerned solely with adjusting one's beliefs to experience* ... Thus Quine's main argument in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" against the possibility of *a priori* justification and knowledge turns out to be totally lacking in force: it reaches the conclusion that there is no *a priori* justification only by adopting a conception of epistemic rationality that already tacitly assumes that this is so.¹⁹

Hilary Kornblith, in his "The Impurity of Reason," insists that this is not "the right way to understand the Quinean move." Kornblith observes that "the web metaphor is designed to show that there is available a way of looking at things which makes sense of a thoroughgoing rejection of the *a priori*."²⁰ Kornblith is entirely right to say that the web metaphor is intended to constitute an empiricist epistemology that accounts for human knowledge and requires no appeal whatever to *a priori* awareness or knowledge. On the other hand, BonJour is also entirely right to say that the metaphor is question-begging as an argument for empiricism over rationalism or as an argument against the very possibility of *a priori* awareness. The metaphor can only serve as an argument for empiricism and against rationalism insofar as it constitutes an elaboration of a potentially plausible empiricist epistemology, but to that extent it *assumes* empiricism (as, of course,

Quine's position if it can also be shown that skepticism is avoidable, and that, of course, can only be shown by means of the production of a secure metaphysics.

¹⁹ BonJour 1999, p. 76. Of course, Quine's argument in favor of universal revisability in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" is also presumably buttressed by his arguments against the possibility of drawing a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, in addition to the support it receives from Duhemian holism. The two arguments are intended jointly to entail universal revisability. Even taken together, they don't entail universal revisability, however, because Quine's arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction do not tell against the possibility of *a priori* knowledge, as we saw in Chapter Three.

²⁰ Kornblith 2000, p. 74.

it would).²¹ Likewise, it cannot possibly operate as an argument against the very possibility of *a priori* awareness without either begging the question or undermining itself in the attempt, as we saw in chapter three. Kornblith is right to say that Quine's epistemology is, in part, an attempt to make sense of "a thoroughgoing rejection of the *a priori*," but it cannot be construed as making sense of a rejection of the *a priori* in principle and in advance.

Construed in the first way, however, the argument is that the empiricist can account for human knowledge without needing to appeal to *a priori* awareness or knowledge. Of course, this argument depends upon the empiricist's account of human knowledge being acceptable as an epistemology, and Bonjour maintains that it is not. For one thing, Quine's view can offer nothing to recommend it as an account of epistemic justification: we can have no reasons whatever for thinking that if our beliefs are generated in ways that are consistent with Quine's picture of epistemic rationality, they will be true.²² Moreover, the only reasons we could have for accepting our current standards as conducive to knowledge would ultimately rest on those standards themselves. This may seem to be a bit unfair, since Quine does not think that it is possible to say whether our beliefs are true if what we mean by saying a belief is "true" is that it "gets the world right." As we have seen, however, Quine is not entitled to this wholesale rejection of metaphysical realism, and he can offer no reasons for abandoning

²¹ Indeed, Quine and his followers observe that we are right to prefer our conceptual framework to that of, say, the ancient Greeks, because ours is more comprehensively explanatory – it makes sense of more of our experience than does theirs. But why think that adherence to our framework (rather than theirs) is *rational*? If explanatory power were the only goal of our epistemological enterprise, then indeed greater explanatory power would be the most that we could hope for; but if this is just what we mean by rationality, then the claim that our adherence to our framework is rational is tautological. To paraphrase Wesley Salmon, we can call ourselves rational, *and isn't that nice!*

²² I offered essentially the same argument in Chapter Six, footnote seventeen.

comprehensive epistemology. Bonjour's point, then, is not question-begging so long as Quine cannot rule out metaphysical realism, which he cannot.

Kornblith replies that Bonjour's argument makes it sound as though the self-certification of our epistemic standards is a simple and straightforward matter – merely patting ourselves on the back. He suggests that, according to Bonjour's picture of the situation, we “use our methods to investigate whether our methods are truth-conducive, conclude that they are, and then stop.” Nothing, Kornblith insists, could be further from the truth: “the Quinean project of investigating the methods which we actually use, and then attempting to explain how they might actually work, turns out to be a constructive project with tremendous potential for revision of our standards.” For good measure, he adds that “epistemic justification, on this view, is a highly non-trivial achievement.”

The rationalist's claim that using our standards to investigate our standards is question-begging does not, however, imply that such investigation is trivial, or that it cannot or will not lead to changes in our standards. After all, such investigation, to the extent that it is empirical, will require contact with occasionally stubborn experience, which may force (or seem to force) a shift in our standards and our practice. The point, however, is that we can have no basis for saying that such shifts are rational in that they are more likely to lead to the truth. Even if our standards shift as a result of an investigation of our standards, this is, in the end, nothing to the point, because we can only be confident that the shift was justified if we can be confident that our original standards were justified. This either leads to an infinite regress or to the claim that our standards simply can never be justified in the way hoped for by the rationalist. This claim, however, cannot be supported by the empiricist.

The empiricist can, of course, point to the success of our cognitive endeavors as evidence that our practices are truth-conducive, or at least rational. Nevertheless, this does not, as Kornblith seems to suppose, warrant the conclusion that “given the success of the scientific enterprise, whatever methods have been used in the development of scientific theorizing are ones which we should ourselves adopt if we wish to have more accurate beliefs.”²³ We can have no reason whatever, on Quine’s view, for believing this, since we can have no way of talking about the reasonableness of conservatism as an epistemic principle in light of the fit of our actual beliefs with reality. Kornblith says that “the Quinean practice of self-examination” is not aimed at anyone who is a “radical skeptic about the entire practice of science,” but as we have seen, the empiricist cannot simply refuse to answer the skeptical question. Again, the Cartesian skeptical question, and the basic epistemological question, is not whether we have any knowledge at all, but how our knowledge is possible. Kornblith, like Katz, takes the basic or only task of epistemology to be the development of the best possible account of scientific knowledge, but this is simply a mistake. This is not to say that providing an acceptable account of scientific knowledge is not among the tasks of epistemology, but it is not the only, and certainly is not the most basic, task. Kornblith maintains that

the empiricist’s doubts about the importance of a priority, in the end, come down to this: the important philosophical questions we wish to ask call for substantive and illuminating intellectual answers. The appeal to a priority seems to avoid, rather than address, the questions about which we care so deeply. If the appeal to a priority is to solve these questions, then a great deal more will need to be said about the kind of illumination which such appeals are meant to provide.²⁴

Since the appeal to *a priori* awareness is meant to account for the possibility of knowledge of the world, and thus to answer the basic epistemological question, it is not

²³ Kornblith 2000, p 77.

altogether surprising that someone who does not regard this as a serious philosophical question would find appeals to *a priori* awareness unilluminating. What, however, are “the questions we care about so deeply?” Questions such as “To what extent are human beings prone to fundamental attribution errors?” or questions such as “Can we be aware of mind-independent features of reality as such, and if so, how?” I do not wish to suggest that no one is, or can be, driven by questions like the first one, but it should, I think, go without saying that questions such as the second are more fundamental, and can only partially be answered by way of getting answers to the first sort of question. Both are legitimate (and important) epistemological questions. My point is not that questions of the first sort are unimportant, or that questions of the second sort should be our only, or even our primary, focus; my point is that these are two essentially different sorts of epistemological question, that the second sort of question cannot be ruled out, as Kornblith seems to suppose without argument, and that the second sort of question is not exhausted by answering all the questions there are of the first sort.

To return, then, to Bonjour’s critique of Quinean epistemology, he further argues that Quine’s view is ultimately unacceptable because it leaves us with no way of making sense of the need to revise our beliefs in light of anything. The reason for this is that since any belief can be revised or abandoned, and since no belief has its meaning (or empirical import, or epistemic import) in isolation, there is nothing that actually generates the tension or conflict required to demand a revision. Even if I hold two contradictory beliefs, along with the belief that two contradictory statements cannot both be true, I am only in a position to assign meaning to the three statements in light of experience, and in light of their relation to one another, but then I need a fourth statement that tells me to

²⁴ Ibid., p. 87.

interpret the apparent conflict as actual, unacceptable conflict, but then I need a fifth statement that tells me to interpret the fourth statement as true in light of my other beliefs, but then ... Since the demand for background sentences is infinite, the conflict can never even get started, and Quine's view is a non-starter.

Kornblith's first reply to Bonjour on this point is *tu quoque*: "this is an odd claim for Bonjour to be making, given his commitment ... to the view that even a priori justified beliefs may be rationally revised in light of further evidence. ... if Quine's view leads to total skepticism for this reason, Bonjour's moderate rationalism does as well." This would not be the case, however, if at least some of our *a priori* beliefs or awareness were not open to revision. Kornblith's second reply, however, is no better. He argues that Bonjour's criticism of Quine "does not square with the actual conduct of science." The point, I take it, is that in actual practice the need for revision and the process of revision does indeed gain traction somewhere, and our beliefs are revised in light of our experience and observation. Again, however, if Quine's account is merely a description of actual practice, then it cannot serve as a prescription for how to approach belief revision in the future, since any belief can be given up, and since the argument that the success of science warrants continuing our actual practice assumes the scheme-independent rationality of induction. Bonjour's point once again revolves around the issue of justification: he does not say that revision could not in practice get started, he says that revision could not in principle be shown to be rational.

Kornblith remarks that "fit with empirical beliefs is always rationally at issue, even if there should be cases of beliefs which somehow could not be given up in the face

of empirical evidence.”²⁵ He concludes from this that “the appeal to a priority can do no epistemological work.”²⁶ This is misleading, and his conclusion does not follow (or, if it does, then it should follow equally well for empirical beliefs, which would be incoherent, since then nothing would be doing the epistemic work). If some of our genuine *a priori* knowledge is unrevisable, then it would of course be correct to say that these beliefs will cohere with our empirical beliefs, but this is putting things the wrong way round: the coherence goes the other way. Thus it is simply wrong to say that the appeal to *a priori* beliefs can do no epistemological work; this appeal is doing the work of permitting inferences beyond immediate experience. The rationalist wishes to claim that we can have knowledge that goes beyond, or transcends, all possible future experience, in the sense that such knowledge can be known in advance necessarily to apply to all possible future experience, and in the sense that such knowledge cannot and will not be refuted by any future experience. The empiricist challenges the rationalist to demonstrate that we do in fact have such knowledge, but the challenge for the empiricist would seem to be to explain how we can have any knowledge that goes beyond immediate experience.

To the extent that the empiricist admits only our five senses and our ability to calculate as potential modes of awareness and conduits of knowledge and information, it is only our ability to calculate (and reflect)²⁷ that would enable us to escape the bounds of the present moment. If, however, our reasons for saying that our ability to calculate can provide us with knowledge are themselves empirical, then the problem becomes even

²⁵ Kornblith 2000, p. 71.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ I have so far excluded memory from my discussion of empiricism and rationalism as one of our modes of awareness, but this is only because if the empiricist is correct in thinking that our five senses and our ability to calculate are the only modes of awareness that we really have, then memory cannot count as a distinct mode, since the contents of our memories can only consist of recollected sensations and calculations.

more acute. In that case, even inferences from present experience are justified, in the end, by present experience (or past experience, which is simply the present experience of yesterday), so we are left with the question how we can know anything that goes beyond present experience. Bonjour considers whether “an argument of any sort [could] be entirely justified on empirical grounds,” and he observes that “it seems clear on reflection that the answer to this question is ‘no.’” After all, “any purely empirical ingredient [in an argument can be] formulated as an additional empirical premise,” and “when all such premises have been explicitly formulated, either the intended conclusion [of the argument] will be explicitly included among [the premises] or it will not.” If it is included, no argument is required; if it is not, no argument is possible, since “the needed inference clearly goes beyond what can be derived entirely from experience.” Thus, Bonjour concludes, “the repudiation of all *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally, thus amounting in effect to intellectual suicide.”²⁸

Kornblith wonders who is the intended audience of this argument, since “the argument seems to be addressed only to those who already accept its conclusion.” He notes that the argument presupposes foundationalism, so that no one other than foundationalists could possibly take it seriously. This assessment of the argument, however, ignores all of the trouble that Bonjour undertakes to demonstrate that some sort of foundationalism is the only tenable epistemology. Thus, Bonjour takes the first and the second dispensability arguments to be answered, and so shall I.

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²⁸ Bonjour 1999, p. 5.

We must now return to our reply to the inductive argument, and to Bonjour's speculative metaphysics. Since, as we have seen, only a secure metaphysics can ultimately answer the inductive argument, Bonjour's speculative metaphysics will not provide the reply we need, or the basis for a comprehensive epistemology, and will thus not meet our demands. If Bonjour offered an argument to the effect that the best we can do is a speculative metaphysics, then we could perhaps accept that his metaphysics is the best that we can do (if it were acceptable on other grounds), but in fact Bonjour admits that a secure metaphysics is needed and provides none. He does suggest that it is "relatively uncontroversial" that "the Cartesian goal cannot be attained for 'natural knowledge,'" but he does not elaborate.

Still, his speculative metaphysics is instructive. Bonjour rejects representationalism in its current incarnation as the computational theory of cognition, primarily because this version of representationalism would seem to entail that we can never be aware of the contents of our own thoughts. Bonjour finds this consequence of the computational theory so repellant and counter-intuitive that he takes it as a *reductio* of the theory itself. This is an intriguing line of argument (though perhaps it comes to little more than a version of John Searle's Chinese Room argument), but inasmuch as we have already undertaken an effective demolition of representationalism in Chapter Five, we shall not pause to evaluate it.

Bonjour realizes that the problem with representationalism involves the representation relation itself. "No surrogate or stand-in of any sort will do," he says, "since any account of the relation between such a surrogate and the property itself would

raise anew all the same difficulties that afflict the symbolic theory (of which any such view would in effect be an instance).” I am not so sure that every version of representationalism is a version of the computational theory of cognition, but every version of representationalism is arguably a version of a symbolic theory of mental content, however that content is processed, and it is ultimately this theory to which Bonjour objects. His conclusion, however, is that for some mental states to have intrinsic content, the forms or nature of the objects of thought must themselves “literally occur,” in some sense, in those states. Thus, “the view is that when I think of triangular things, the form triangularity informs my mind in a special way that is different from the way in which it informs triangular things: it has *esse intentionale* as opposed to *esse naturale*.” Bonjour hastens to add that he thinks it is more sensible to construe the account as involving the existence of a separate intentional form of triangularity, rather than construing it as involving two instantiation relations – one for thoughts and one for things. It is hard to see how this improves the situation, however. Bonjour’s realism is at least more comprehensive than Katz’s, and it at least (perhaps) implies a theory of reference, but in the end Bonjour’s realism is only slightly more plausible than Katz’s. I shall offer an explanation of where and why Katz and Bonjour both go wrong, and consider how we may begin to put things right, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

MOVING BEYOND REPRESENTATIONALISM: SKETCH OF A PROGRESSIVE RATIONALISM

What, exactly, is the nature of *a priori* awareness? How does it operate, and how does one have it? A comprehensive and satisfactory account of the nature of *a priori* awareness would, of course, require a secure metaphysics, because any successful account of the possibility of *a priori* awareness will require metaphysical assertions about the link between the mind and reality, and because these assertions themselves can only be known (if at all), and known to be true, *a priori*. Thus, as we have noted as far back as the first chapter, *a priori* awareness must, in the end, be self-certifying, or otherwise underwrite the possibility of its own certification. That is to say that at least some of what we know *a priori* must be itself concerned with the facts about reality that make it possible for us to have any knowledge at all of the sort that *a priori* knowledge professes to be. I am afraid, however, that I cannot, at present, offer a secure metaphysics that would underwrite *a priori* knowledge.

Unlike Bonjour and Katz, I do not intend simply to offer up a speculative ontology and ignore the question of the possibility of a secure metaphysics. As I have argued, if a secure metaphysics is not to be had, then a speculative one must suffice, because we cannot do without it. Nevertheless, the possibility of a secure metaphysics cannot be ruled out, for the same reason that *a priori* awareness cannot be ruled out. To rule out the possibility of a secure metaphysics, we would need to appeal to metaphysical assertions that would entail that no metaphysical assertions can be known to be necessarily true. Of course, if these assertions are themselves not necessarily true, then

they cannot establish the impossibility of a secure metaphysics, and if they are necessarily true, then they would constitute a secure metaphysics, and would thus be self-vitiating.

We cannot do without metaphysical realism, however, because we cannot abandon the project of comprehensive epistemology, and because comprehensive epistemology cannot be undertaken without metaphysical realism. The arguments intended to rule out the very possibility of *a priori* awareness fail because, to be successful, they would themselves require *a priori* knowable metaphysical assertions. Moreover, the arguments against comprehensive epistemology fail because they cannot rationally recommend themselves. No empiricist epistemology can, however, hope to be comprehensive; thus, the only possibly successful epistemology is rationalist, and foundationalist. If, at the end of the day, we cannot answer the skeptic, then we can offer no answer to the question “How is knowledge possible?”, but this would also mean that we could not say why we cannot answer the skeptic, because any answer would require us to be able to know why we can have no means of securing our access to reality as it is in itself, and this knowledge would itself transcend our cognitive limits. This would not mean, however, that the skeptic’s position is incoherent, as is frequently assumed; it would mean that we could never say, to all eternity, whether any of our beliefs are in fact rational.

I do not believe, however, that such pessimism is warranted. We shall see, in the course of the following discussion of the nature and possibility of *a priori* awareness, that a potentially securable metaphysics is available, because there are certain unrevisable *a priori* truths that we cannot do without.

* * *

Before we begin to discuss the possibility and actuality of *a priori* awareness, however, it will be well to try to get a bit clearer about the nature of *a priori* awareness. As was noted in Chapter Six, empiricists frequently contend that the very idea of *a priori* awareness is incomprehensible – or at least that rationalists have offered no comprehensible account of it – and that the very idea seems more like a mystical or occult power than a cognitive faculty.¹ In response to this challenge, rationalists have often done more harm than good. For one thing, many rationalists persist in using terms such as “rational insight” or “rational intuition,” that *sound* mystical. What is worse, however, is that the terms “insight” and “intuition” are themselves notoriously unclear and imprecise, so that to prefix such terms with “rational” offers little in the way of clarification, and in fact tends to make things muddier. I cannot offer anything like a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of any of these terms,² but we can get quite a lot clearer about all of them.

What, first of all, is intuition?³ Much has been made recently of the fact that intuitions are neither universal nor reliable – that they are culturally shaped, historically

¹ In fact, some philosophers, like Austin, have gone so far as to claim that they do not even understand what is meant by the question whether there are such things as “*a priori* concepts” (Austin 1970, pp. 32 and 47). Austin’s insistence that he does not understand the question seems, however, to be little more than a glib way of saying that once the question is properly analyzed we shall see that any serious attempt to clarify the origins of our concepts will amount to “either nothing or nonsense” (p. 46).

² And I would not do so even if I could.

³ I shall not specifically address mathematical intuition (or mathematical intuitionism) in this discussion, since mathematical intuition (or intuitionism) is generally conceived either (1) as a form of rational insight akin to what I have been calling “*a priori* awareness,” in which case mathematical intuition is simply a specific instance of the general form of this sort of awareness, and does not require separate treatment here, or (2) as some sort of Kantian cognitive awareness of the form of inner intuition of temporal succession, in

conditioned, context-sensitive, and context-relative. Used as a court of final appeal, they can operate as a philosophical cudgel, a means of convenient dismissal of opposing views, a weapon of discrimination, or a mechanism of group identification and exclusion.⁴ To the extent that intuition is something like our pre-reflective, non-discursive and spontaneous disposition toward the meaning or truth-value of statements and their contents, all this would seem to be true. Yet, philosophers – particularly analytic philosophers – rely, or claim to rely, on their intuitions all the time, and take them actually to constitute *evidence* in favor of certain claims or theses. If intuition is so unreliable, why do they do this?

In the context of a discussion of the notions of necessary and contingent properties, Saul Kripke claims, in *Naming and Necessity*, that “if someone thinks that [one of these notions] is a philosopher’s notion with no intuitive content, he is wrong.”⁵ He goes on to observe that “of course, some philosophers think that something’s having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it,” but that he thinks “it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything.”⁶ In fact, Kripke adds, “I really don’t know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking.”⁷ That’s a pretty strong statement. Why does Kripke assign such importance to intuition, and what does he mean by it?

Since he is insisting that the notions of necessary and contingent properties are not simply “philosophers’ notions,” it would seem that in asserting that these notions

which case it is something more like a specific instance of the sort of thing contemporary philosophers are talking about when they speak generally of “intuition,” and again does not require separate treatment.

⁴ See the discussions of Putnam’s rhetorical dismissal of rationalists in Chapter Four.

⁵ Kripke 1980, pp. 41-42.

⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷ Ibid.

have “intuitive content” he means to claim, as against those who wish to deny that ordinary speakers or laypersons distinguish between necessary and contingent properties, that this distinction is a perfectly commonplace one – a common sense distinction. Of course, it is straightforwardly empirical matter whether ordinary speakers make this distinction, or one like it, and it is not at all clear how this bears on the question of the meaningfulness of the notions in question, or the meaningfulness of the distinction itself. Isn’t it possible for ordinary language and common sense to employ illegitimate or erroneous distinctions? Why would Kripke say that he doesn’t know “what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, *ultimately speaking*?”

David Lewis observes that “one comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions,” and he suggests that

it is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system. A metaphysician’s analysis of mind is an attempt at systematizing our opinions about mind. It succeeds to the extent that (1) it is systematic, and (2) it respects those of our pre-philosophical opinions to which we are firmly attached. ... There is some give-and-take, but not too much: some of us sometimes change our minds on some points of common opinion, if they conflict irremediably with a doctrine that commands our belief by its systematic beauty and its agreement with more important common opinions.⁸

Now I would argue that this is simply false. As we have seen in the last two chapters, it is precisely the job of comprehensive epistemology to inquire into the justification of our beliefs about the world, and into the very possibility of knowledge, not to take our knowledge, or common sense, for granted. Kripke and Lewis, like positivists and pragmatists, appear to want to turn their backs on the skeptic.

⁸ Lewis 1979, p. 186.

In much of the discussion of skepticism that has taken place in analytic philosophy over the course of the last hundred or so years, “the skeptic” has tended to be rather literally personified, as though he or she were some real, flesh-and-blood heretic, who simply is not aware that his or her own communicative commitments undermine the very skepticism being expressed, by requiring the skeptic to rely upon the shared assumptions of discourse (or common sense) that he or she is calling into question. No doubt this is because philosophers who wished to turn their backs on the skeptic actually had other specific philosophers in mind as representatives of the sort of skeptical attitude that they wanted to reject. It may also be a consequence of the influence of thinkers like Austin and Wittgenstein, who emphasized the need for a context for meaningful utterance, and who pointed out that in most contexts nobody would think to question the fact that they are standing on the ground, and that they have two hands. This, however, has the effect of treating philosophers as though they were aliens. What the personification of the skeptic ignores is that *we are the skeptic*. Descartes assumes the skeptical position in order to see whether and how he can refute it in its strongest imaginable form. This is not to say that there are not, in fact, actual skeptics, or that there never have been any. Rather, the point is that we assume skepticism as a means of testing the strength of our own reasons for believing what we do. In any argument, we take up the stance of the opposition to see whether our arguments can meet those that are, and could be, offered on the other side. Epistemologically speaking, the opposition is the skeptic.

It is not clear why it is at all relevant that in most contexts nobody would think to question whether there are external objects, or whether they have two hands. In most

contexts (if one really thinks about what this comes to), nobody thinks to wonder whether quarks are the smallest unit of matter, but this should not prevent us, and it did not prevent Wittgenstein, from saying that particle physicists are not talking nonsense. There is clearly a context within which some people question whether they have two hands, and this is not (usually) because they really doubt that they do, but because they want to know how it is that we can be secure in this knowledge, and because they are convinced that we ought to be able to have this security but cannot see how to come by it. As we have seen, no argument (that is not self-undermining) can be offered to the effect that we hope for such security in vain. To begin by affirming that we have the knowledge we would hope to secure, and that therefore the skeptic has no point to make, is to turn our backs on philosophical inquiry itself. If there are no meaningful contexts in which someone would or could question that she has two hands, then philosophical inquiry is meaningless. It is not sufficiently frequently reiterated that this was precisely Wittgenstein's view: he was an anti-philosophy philosopher.

Philosophy questions and examines our common sense beliefs, it does not enshrine them. In fact, this is true of science as well. This is why Quine is both right and wrong to say that science is continuous with common sense. Science and philosophy both grow out of common sense, for they arise in the context of the quite ordinary human activity of wonder, and common sense embodies (to some extent) our pre-reflective attempt to organize and understand the world. But both philosophy and science go beyond common sense, and are not to that extent continuous with it, because neither takes common sense for granted, because they both involve an examination and critique of

common sense (as a pre-reflective “theory” of the world), and because they both require reflection of a sort that sometimes forces common sense convictions to be given up.

Lewis acknowledges this, but insists that while “there is some give-and-take,” there is “not too much.” Common sense, like the intuition that reflects it, is provincial in both time and place; it is context-bound. Certain common sense notions, such as that we each have two hands, have probably been held by all persons in all places and times. Many common sense notions, however, such as that the earth stands still, depend upon our pre-reflective view of things from where we stand. This notion is no longer part of our common sense view of the world, which suggests that common sense is corrigible. To treat common sense as though it were largely right, with the appropriate adjustments, however, is to treat science and philosophy as the corrective arms of common sense, and this is to ignore the difference between our culturally, historically, and perspectively conditioned pre-reflective intuitions and the self-correcting project of reflection. Common sense, as Russell put it, “leaves us completely in the dark as to the true intrinsic nature of physical objects, and if there were good reason to regard them as mental, we could not legitimately reject this opinion merely because it strikes us as strange. The truth about physical objects *must* be strange.”⁹ As Bryan Magee observes:

modern science has shown that behind our moment-to-moment experience of the everyday world teem truths and realities that common sense is totally unaware of, that are frequently astounding and often counter-intuitive, and sometimes deeply difficult to grasp even when we know them to be true. ... In these circumstances attempts to defend the commonsense view of the world are doomed before they begin.¹⁰

⁹ Russell 1959, p. 38.

¹⁰ Magee 1999, p. 42.

Lewis and Kripke deserve credit for being among the first philosophers in recent analytic philosophy to insist on the fact that ordinary people understand, have and utilize metaphysical notions – that such notions are not the sole province of philosophers-qua-specialists, or qua-misusers-of-language. If ordinary people did not have such notions, then philosophers would not be ordinary people, even contingently, or initially, before their “conversion” to philosophy. They also deserve credit for noting that our possession and acquisition of metaphysical notions are largely non-discursive (though not pre-reflective, or necessarily innate). In their (understandable) zeal to reinstate metaphysical notions, however, Lewis and Kripke concede too much to empiricism by construing intuition in terms of common sense, so as to avoid skepticism and preserve a conception of philosophy that takes its chief business to be the clarification of what we already know or believe. Unfortunately, this licensed the rather regrettable practice among analytic philosophers of appealing to their intuitions as a last resort in the justification of their views, and in the refusal to treat with those who do not share their intuitions, prompting the counter-attack mentioned earlier. Intuitions understood as the concretization of common sense are clearly neither trans-cultural nor trans-historical, and we have no more reason for thinking that they are a reliable guide to justified belief than we have to think that conservatism in theory choice is rational in light of our current epistemic standards.

If, on the other hand, we construe intuition as a non-discursive awareness of necessity or of necessary truth, then we are getting closer to an acceptable clarification of the nature of *a priori* awareness. To call such intuition “rational” is perhaps somewhat redundant, but the usage is no doubt intended both to distinguish this sort of intuition from other sorts (like the concretization of common sense), and to call attention to the

fact that it operates independently of sensory awareness or experience (though not without any initial sensory input whatever). Given the apparent redundancy of “rational intuition,” however, where “intuition” is construed as suggested above, and given the ambiguity of the term “intuition” used by itself, we shall prefer to retain the term “*a priori* awareness.” This sort of awareness is universal and trans-historical.¹¹ Understood in this way, however, how can we make sense of the possibility of *a priori* awareness? Isn’t it still mystical?

Inasmuch as we cannot abandon the project of comprehensive epistemology, we must, in developing this project, appeal to the possibility and actuality of *a priori* awareness to account for the possibility and actuality of our having knowledge of reality as such. Thus, we *must* have an account of the possibility of *a priori* awareness that is either secure now or potentially securable – that is to say, one that secures, or can be developed in the direction of securing, the possibility (and actuality) of *a priori* awareness through *a priori* knowledge that is self-certifying, or that underwrites the possibility of its own certification. We do not have such an account at present, but we can see how we may move in the direction of developing one. As we have seen, at least some of the principles of epistemological theory choice must be in principle unrevisable

¹¹ There are serious and compelling arguments on offer in feminist and social and political philosophy, as well as in the work of “continental” thinkers such as Habermas, Merleau-Ponty, Adorno and Derrida (among others), that this is not so, and that norms of rationality are constituted communicatively among agents participating in social forms of life. Another argument that is sometimes pressed in this context is that it is meaningless to say that humans are, by nature, capable of *a priori* awareness, because there is no such thing as universal human nature. I cannot begin to do justice to these arguments here. Suffice it for now to say that I think the problem is misstated. Even if humans are not by nature capable of *a priori* awareness (trivially, because there is no universal human nature), this does not mean that not everyone is capable of *a priori* awareness, given the appropriate preparation. Norms of rationality are perfectly objective, even if they are only realized discursively. The battle is not truly joined here, but at the much deeper level of the very possibility of knowledge of reality as it is in itself, which many of the thinkers and traditions mentioned above reject. To that extent, I would (eventually) need to deal with their arguments in the same way we dealt with the arguments of the positivists and the pragmatists, in Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five.

in order for our epistemology to avoid skepticism, so some of these principles must be necessary truths about reality as such. Such principles as the principle of non-contradiction, for instance, are not, and cannot be, self-certifying, but they constitute the unrevisable principles that guide and constrain theory choice as we select, not speculative, but *hypothetical*, metaphysical principles and postulates that form part of our self-correcting project of accounting for the unrevisability of the principles themselves, for the possibility and actuality of *a priori* awareness, and for the possibility of knowledge in general. This is a metaphysics that *does* progress, *pace* Kant, positivism and pragmatism. Some of the metaphysical postulates that we select (and perhaps some of the principles of theory choice) will be revisable, and will require revision, but they will be revisable only in light of further pure ratiocination¹² and in light of at least some unrevisable principles without which reason could not operate. Moreover, this process of revision will be self-correcting because there are minimally agreed-upon principles of theory choice to which any acceptable metaphysical theory must conform. Of course, within the constraints of these principles, much is possible and permissible, which is perhaps why metaphysical debates have seemed to some philosophers to be interminable and pointless. Fortunately, they are neither. Two related concrete contributions to the advancement of metaphysics were, in fact, made in the modern period by empiricists. One was the observation that the existence of God, or of anything, cannot be established through rational argumentation alone. The other was the observation that existence is not a predicate. These are not, and cannot be, simply facts about the way we use the words

¹² See Chapters Six and Seven for an elaboration and defense of the claim that *a priori* beliefs are (ultimately) revisable only in light of further *a priori* beliefs.

“God” and “exists”; they are constraints on the very possibility of what we can know through reason alone.

Even Hilary Putnam notes that while he takes it “as a fact of life” that “there is a sense in which the task of philosophy is to overcome metaphysics,” there is also “a sense in which its task is to continue metaphysical discussion.” He says that “in every philosopher there is a part that cries, ‘This enterprise is vain, frivolous, crazy—we must say ‘Stop!’ and a part that cries, ‘This enterprise is simply reflection at the most general and abstract level; to put a stop to it would be a crime against reason.’”¹³ It would be worse than a crime against reason, it would preclude the very possibility of reasoning altogether. Putnam, in the course of developing his famous “brain-in-a-vat” argument, admits that his reasoning has proceeded along lines that are best characterized as *a priori*.¹⁴ This is Laurence Bonjour’s insight in his *In Defense of Pure Reason*. As Bonjour puts it: “the argumentative transition, in thought or discourse, from the premises to the conclusion is an *inference*,” and the inferential steps of any argument are non-discursively apprehended mechanisms of reasoning that can be themselves be expressed as necessary rational principles; thus, “the repudiation of all *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally.”¹⁵

Bonjour concludes that this argument “surely constitutes a strong *prima facie* reason for regarding the idea of *a priori* justification as philosophically and intellectually

¹³ Putnam 1990b, p. 19.

¹⁴ Putnam 1981, p. 16. Of course, Putnam insists that he is reasoning “not in the old ‘absolute’ sense” of *a priori*, because he doesn’t “claim that magical theories of reference are *a priori* wrong,” and he further notes that he is reasoning *a priori* “in the sense of inquiring into what is *reasonably* possible *assuming* certain general premisses, or making certain very broad general assumptions.” The point here, however, is that Putnam recognizes that the inferential steps in his argument, and much of its evidence, depend upon or consist of rational principles, and we have seen that our knowledge of such principles cannot be accounted for without appealing to *a priori* metaphysical realist assumptions or assertions.

¹⁵ Bonjour 1999, p. 5.

indispensable,” and he observes that “the argument for this conclusion is extremely straightforward and obvious, so much so that it is very hard to understand the widespread failure to appreciate it.”¹⁶ The argument has not been appreciated because its *prima facie* appeal has been taken to have been overridden by the incomprehensibility of *a priori* awareness and the apparent availability of an empiricist epistemology that treated rational principles as revisable as a last resort (which explains the appearance of their being necessary). This is where BonJour and Katz go wrong: what is needed is an *ultima facie* reason for thinking that *a priori* awareness is philosophically and intellectually indispensable, and we have seen that the impossibility of abandoning comprehensive epistemology provides us with such a reason. BonJour and Katz maintain that we need only develop a rationalist epistemology that can be defended as preferable to every available empiricist epistemology. Thus, their chief concern is to answer the empiricist, not the skeptic, and to show that an appeal to *a priori* awareness makes better sense of the fact of our scientific and philosophical knowledge than do the available versions of empiricism. As a result, their accounts of *a priori* awareness are developed only enough to support the claim that rationalism is tenable, not to support the claim that rationalism is philosophically and intellectually indispensable. BonJour and Katz emphasize the *prima facie* importance of *a priori* awareness, but it remains open to the empiricist to argue that their accounts of *a priori* awareness are unenlightening, and that empiricism therefore remains preferable. What is needed is an argument to the effect that *a priori* awareness, and thus rationalism and metaphysical realism, are inescapable, and this is what I have provided. Thus, while *a priori* awareness may still (at this point) seem somewhat mystical, we cannot do without it. In the remainder of this discussion, I shall do what I

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 6 and pp. 3-4.

can to make *a priori* awareness seem comprehensible, or at least to rid it of the appearance of mysticism.

* * *

I have described metaphysics as inquiry into ultimate ontology – the discovery of “the furniture of the universe.” This description of metaphysics provides Quine and other naturalistic and scientistic philosophers with another argument in favor of the elimination of metaphysics, and in favor of viewing philosophy as concerned, not with reality directly or as such, but with scientific discourse about reality. The argument is that it is science, not philosophy, that postulates objects, and that the sciences cover knowable reality exhaustively. Philosophy draws distinctions, but it takes as its subject matter the concepts (objects) introduced and utilized by, the sciences. This is partly true: metaphysics does not, in general, postulate objects, so the description above is somewhat misleading. Only somewhat, however, because we need not construe inquiry into ultimate ontology as concerned with the discovery of specific objects, but as concerned with the general nature of objecthood and worldhood – with the principles that govern the structure and the limits of reality. While science is concerned with the construction and limits of what is actual and sensible, metaphysics is concerned with what is necessary and intelligible. Thus metaphysics, and philosophy, take reality itself as their subject matter. Moreover, the scientist and the metaphysician do not study reality in the same way, or study the same aspects of it, except occasionally. Philosophy is of course a science in concepts, but it is not, as Quine would have it, the science *of* concepts.

A priori awareness can only be a feature or function of cognition that is capable of being in receipt of information about the necessary features or organization of reality itself. Does that make it mystical? I shall offer three reasons why it does not. Firstly, as Putnam points out, we do not have anything like a comprehensive, or really even a very satisfactory account of ordinary, empirical sensory awareness, when it comes to the questions of how sensory input becomes mental content, and how that content is processed, accessed and utilized. Philosophy of mind still abounds with terminology such as “raw feel,” “after-image,” “sense data,” and “qualia.” Concerning the process(es) through which sensory input informs thought, we remain almost totally in the dark.

Secondly, the reason for this is that we lack an account of conscious awareness. Presumably, if the mind is capable of being aware of at least some of the necessary features of reality, this capacity will be exercised through certain conscious cognitive processes, and will not be associated with the operation of any empirically observable sensory organs. To insist that if there is such a thing as *a priori* awareness we should know something more about it by now is to insist that we should already have a more complete and satisfactory account of the nature of consciousness. In fact, there are some philosophers who insist on just such a thing, and who moreover argue that the persistent impenetrability and mysteriousness of consciousness suggest that there simply is no such thing. I can offer nothing like a fully developed challenge to this argument here, but I will say that this sort of argument strikes me as unnecessarily hasty and as in fact unmotivated. The only reason we could have for thinking that if consciousness is a bona fide phenomenon our science should already have been able to explain it is that consciousness is not sufficiently complicated to elude explanation by current methods.

We can have no possible warrant for this view, which involves a confidence in the explanatory powers of current science that is supported neither historically nor by the results of current research on the brain. If we are to have an account of *a priori* awareness as a cognitive capacity, it will surely arrive no sooner than a rather more developed account of the nature of conscious awareness.

Thirdly, an explication of the operation of *a priori* awareness must ultimately involve an account of the link between mind and reality. Any account of this link will require metaphysical assumptions or assertions. This is not a short argument for dualism, or for the claim that this aspect of conscious awareness (or of conscious awareness in general) will forever remain inexplicable in scientific terms because it is a metaphysical concept. Rather, it is an observation that there will remain an irreducibly philosophical component to any satisfactory account of *a priori* awareness, which account must be a joint product of scientific and metaphysical inquiry. Therefore, not only do we have no reason to think that we should already be in possession of an account of *a priori* awareness, but we can see that such an account must be developed in the process of providing an account of the nature of consciousness. If *a priori* awareness is mystical, consciousness is also mystical, and so is philosophy of consciousness.

What is needed, then, to provide an account of *a priori* awareness, is a metaphysical account of the relationship between the mind and the rest of reality. In Chapter Six I conceded that it seems unlikely that such an account can be offered by a pluralist metaphysics. I say this because a pluralist metaphysics must, in the end, offer an account of how ideas reveal to the mind facts about the order, nature and structure of distinct, mind-independent entities. That is to say, a pluralist metaphysics must explain

the possibility (and actuality) of the mind having *contact* (in some sense of contact) with things-in-themselves, and it is at best far from clear how this may be done. It is not obvious that, as Katz suggests, we would have to prove that God exists. Of course, this was Descartes' strategy, and if we could establish the existence of God, and establish that He would guarantee the actuality of contact, then we would indeed have (the beginnings of) an account of *a priori* awareness. God would, at least, guarantee the possibly proper operation of rational insight, and that would be enough to get started.¹⁷ In any event, God's existence cannot be established by reason alone, but this does not mean that the pluralist has exhausted her options. On the other hand, a pluralist metaphysics implies, at minimum, that we and the other objects of the world are distinct entities, so the pluralist must somehow overcome the metaphysical problem of interaction. Hilary Putnam has argued that the only way to make sense of the idea that our minds are capable of being aware of the nature of reality as it is in itself is to assume that reality itself is a mind, or is like a mind, or is rational, or rationally ordered.¹⁸ This takes for granted Berkeley's dictum that ideas really can only be like other ideas. It is not clear that this is true, but if it is not, only a successful solution of the metaphysical problem of interaction could show that and why it is not. Moreover, pluralists cannot revive representationalism as an account of interaction, because representationalism is untenable. There have been, in the history of philosophy, pluralist metaphysicians of genius,¹⁹ who have produced thoroughgoing and compelling metaphysics, so I do not intend to rule anything out.

¹⁷ Of course, we would then need a Cartesian science of psychology as a science of immaterial substance. This may seem to suggest that any acceptable account of *a priori* awareness does imply dualism after all, but this would only be the case if proving the existence of God really were our only hope for providing a secure metaphysics, and I submit that this is not obviously the case.

¹⁸ Putnam 1982, p. 154.

¹⁹ Leibniz comes to mind.

A monistic metaphysics would seem, on its face at least, to stand a better chance of providing a metaphysically comprehensible account of *a priori* awareness. Though monism has been the minority metaphysical position in Western thought since Plato, there have also been monist metaphysicians of genius – notably Spinoza, but also arguably Plato (and of course Parmenides, though little of his work survives). If, as Spinoza suggests, thought is a mode of reality,²⁰ then it is not ontologically reducible to physical entities, or to a sequence of interactions between physical entities. Thus we can respect the arguments of those like Searle, earlier put forward by Leibniz in the *Monadology*, as follows:

We must confess that the *perception*, and what depends on it, is *inexplicable in terms of mechanical reasons*, that is, through shapes and motions. If we imagine that there is a machine whose structure makes it think, sense, and have perceptions, we could conceive it to be enlarged, keeping the same proportions, so that we could enter into it, as one enters into a mill. Assuming that, when inspecting its interior, we will only find parts that push one another, and we will never find anything to explain a perception. And so, we should seek perception in the simple substance and not in the composite or the machine.²¹

On the other hand, mind is not, for Spinoza, a distinct substance from body. Spinoza argues that mind and body are co-extensive, that they are in fact identical – the same aspect of reality conceived in different ways.²² If thought is simply a feature of one total reality, then there is no problem of interaction. We need only explain how thought is constituted as a feature of reality that also apprehends the necessary principles of the construction of reality.

* * *

²⁰ Spinoza 1992, p. 64.

²¹ Leibniz 1991, p. 70.

Wittgenstein claims, at the outset of the *Tractatus*, that in that work, the remaining problems of philosophy “have in their essentials been finally solved.”²³ This being, naturally, the main value of the work, its secondary value is that “it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved.”²⁴ Wittgenstein says this not because he means to demonstrate his sensitivity to the fact that solving all of the outstanding problems of philosophy puts food in no one’s mouth, clothes on no one’s back, and shelter over no one’s head, and makes no one safe from violence or harm or injustice. As philosophers, we are, and must always be, acutely aware that philosophy rarely if ever can do these things. Wittgenstein says this, however, because his solution to the problems of philosophy, in the *Tractatus*, and again in *Philosophical Investigations*, involves taking the position that there never really were any actual philosophical problems to begin with. It would in fact have been better, or at least more accurate, if Wittgenstein had said that the *Tractatus* dissolves all of the problems of philosophy, by declaring them pseudo-problems or merely apparent problems. A favorite metaphor of Wittgensteinians is that philosophy exists, and continues to exist, only as a ladder we may use to climb out of philosophical problems. Once we have climbed out, we kick the ladder down behind us. This of course suggests that we are climbing to the end of philosophy – a period in human development wherein, after two-and-a-half thousand years of self-vexation, we can finally rid ourselves of the gadfly once and for all, and show him the way out of the bottle and out of our heads.

²² Spinoza 1992, pp. 66-67, 70-76, and 80-81.

²³ Wittgenstein 1999, p. 29.

²⁴ Ibid.

I could not possibly claim for the present work that it solves all of the problems of philosophy. If it shows anything, however, what it shows is that there are genuine philosophical problems which require thoughtful metaphysical solutions. As Bryan Magee observes, “anyone who believes that the real task of philosophy is to clarify utterance must believe that non-linguistic reality presents us with no philosophical problems. And this is precisely what Austin and the older Wittgenstein, and their followers, did believe.”²⁵ If we are to treat metaphysical questions as senseless or meaningless, we must have ready-to-hand a criterion or theory or account of sense and meaning – and ultimately a theory of knowing – that not only shows that these questions are meaningless, but explains *why* they are meaningless. Any criterion or theory or account of sense and meaning (and ultimately any theory of knowledge) must, however, appeal to the very sort of metaphysical assumptions or assertions to which it is meant to deny us access. There can be no hope of ruling out rationalism or metaphysics. Metaphysical realism is philosophically indispensable.

It may be said that my arguments here will convince no one, and that it is not clear whether they are even needed. Empiricists will not be persuaded by my demonstrations and protestations, and rationalists are already convinced. Besides, as I myself have pointed out, metaphysics and rationalism have returned to philosophy, even to analytic philosophy, at the end of the twentieth, and the beginning of the twenty-first, century. They are outcasts no longer. While positivism is dead, however, it lingers like a specter in philosophy today, a shade of its hegemony in early twentieth century Anglo-American philosophy, and the empiricist revolution of which positivism was a part has continued, and has retained the conception of philosophy as analysis (or as philosophy of

²⁵ Magee 1999, p. 89.

science) for which positivism was the justification, even long after positivism breathed its last. This conception of philosophy must go. My goal in this work was not to defeat empiricism, but to take some of the air out of the wholly unjustified empiricist confidence that has been generated and sustained by the supposed defeat of rationalism. Moreover, philosophical arguments have always had two functions (among many others): to challenge opposing positions, and to contribute to the development and the continued emergence, production, and reproduction of the position being defended. I intend this work to challenge my opponents, but I also mean it as an invocation, an effort to bring rationalism into being and to nourish the being that it has, an incantation that reveals a place for metaphysical questions, deeply and fundamentally human questions – *my* questions – in a world of science and sense.

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