

Jolting the Career of Reason: Absolute Idealism and Other Rationalisms Reconsidered

I

Philosophers have not infrequently been unsatisfied with philosophy conceived simply as conceptual analysis, whether of the Wittgensteinian-Strawsonian informalist sort or the Tarskian-Carnapian formalist sort. Even systematic analytical philosophy *à la* Dummett has not satisfied philosophers with strong metaphysical impulses. They have thirsted for more—"the real metaphysical stuff"—though it is anything but clear that their thirst can be quenched.¹ It may just be more of the irrational heart of rationalism: a hopeless and—or so I shall argue—pointless nostalgia for the Absolute.

As part of my project of demystification with a therapeutic intent, I shall examine what I take to be three failures to quench that metaphysical thirst, though the principal effort will be directed toward the third claimed failure. I make this stress because it is, in my view, the most complete exemplification of a through and through systematic metaphysical view of the world. The other two accounts, which I have extensively examined elsewhere, are here discussed essentially as means of identifying the third. The first, I believe, doesn't get us to "the real metaphysical stuff" at all and the second does so only partially. The first is the attempt to turn philosophy into a meta-inquiry, which still, as a criticism of criticisms, would meet the Kantian *desideratum* that philosophy provide the critical canons to assess the whole of culture, including science. The other two accounts are more metaphysically robust, but (or so I shall argue) are also less plausible than

the first. They have, however, been historically very influential. The second would also, if sound, meet the Kantian *desideratum* of providing a yardstick for critiquing culture, but it would do it by providing us with a grounding metaphysics, a First Philosophy. It is this metaphysics that would, supposedly, provide us with such critical canons or the rational foundation for such critical assessments. The third, which I shall give by far the most extensive attention, is the critical rationalism of Absolute Idealism. It also purports to provide a metaphysical and rational grounding for the claims of religion, science, morality, art, and the like, but it does so in a radically holistic manner. Here we get the fullest articulation of the demands of a really metaphysical philosophy: a philosophy far beyond the claims of an Aristotelianism or a metaphysics within the limits of science alone.²

II

The first account conceives of philosophy as being a certain kind of critical discussion. It is, as John Passmore, who elucidates and defends such a conception of philosophy, remarks, "at least on the philosopher's home ground, the area in which he must be an expert."³ Philosophy, so construed, is a meta-inquiry, an inquiry about inquiry. It fits well with the discussions of linguistic philosophers of the philosophical import of the distinction between *first-order* and *second-order* discourse and their identification of philosophy with a certain kind of *second-order* discourse. But (*pace* Gilbert Ryle and Zeno Vendler), philosophers, in trying to give general critical standards, do not always stick with *second-order* discourse. Even in discussing the use of "rational" or "knowledge" or "morality," the philosopher is often led to the making of critical claims about what is rational, knowledge or morality. As Passmore puts it, "Critical discussion is one way in which human beings try to come to terms with the things around them; it is only to be expected that the analysis of discussion will lead, at many points, into statements about 'the world.'"⁴ What is peculiar to philosophy, so conceived, what distinguishes this critical meta-inquiry into all inquiries, is "in the fact that questions it asks about the world refer back to, and are considered with reference to, the general character of discussion."⁵

What this comes to is unclear. What are we talking about in talking about the general character of discussion? Does talk about politics, fishing, art, sub-atomic particles, mathematics have much in common? There

are, of course, considerations of clarity, orderly presentation, questions concerning whether the discourse is distorted or not, and the like that have features in common. But our way of talking about politics and our way of talking about mathematics are very different and rather domain-dependent. The general things that can be said, revealing the *general* character of the discussion, such as those mentioned above, hardly rise above commonplaces. They hardly require a discipline such as philosophy or science for their discovery and articulation. Rather, common sense casually reflecting on itself is sufficient.

Philosophy is, in going *meta*, also supposed to be “a *critical* discussion of *critical* discussion.”⁶ In the first instance philosophy, as an allegedly critical discussion of the language of morals, religion, law, and politics, may not be at all a critical discussion of critical discussions for the talk here may be, and often is, far from critical and even less frequently general. But that aside, and far more crucially, what are the *general* critical standards that philosophy brings to science and other such institutions as politics, morals, and law? Philosophy, as a *second-order* activity, might clarify concepts by giving us a clearer view of what we do when we actually operate with them. But even to be able to begin this, we already have firmly to understand the concepts in question by knowing how to use the terms (at least those in our mother tongue) expressive of them. Though we know how to use the terms, we may not know how to say how we use them. Philosophy can sometimes be useful here. But this comes to giving, or aspiring to give, an accurate (or reasonably accurate) *description* of our use of words. This can dispel conceptual confusions, mixed-up pictures about how we use such words, but that does not yield critical standards for a critical discussion of our discussions. It will not show us that what, given our use of “knowledge,” we standardly take to be knowledge is not knowledge or that what we take to be reasonable or justified is not so or indeed that it really is. It will not show us, even within certain domains, say, chemistry, American politics, expressionist art, Puritan morality, or architecture, what it is reasonable to believe and what kind of knowledge claims we could make and what our critical standards should be. The critical canons seem at least to be much more domain-relative than that. From the Platonic philosopher to the radically empiricist foundationalist epistemologist, no one has been able to show how the philosopher knows, or even can come to know, by having appropriate philosophical grounds or insights, what nobody else knows or can know so well. They have not been able to show how it is that a philosophical perspective can give us a van-

tage point from which we can critically assess the claims of science and everyday life.⁷

III

Let us now move to the second account of philosophy. It is an outright metaphysical turn, a turn distinctive of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, and taken as central by modern Thomism and other forms of scholasticism. It would not, even on those views, normally be taken to *define* philosophy, but it would be taken to characterize metaphysics (properly done) or “First Philosophy”: that which, on such a conception, is central and most important in philosophy. What I have in mind can be seen from noting a famous quotation from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. He articulates how metaphysics is

the first and last science [here he construes *science* very broadly]. Metaphysics is the first science because it is logically presupposed by every other science. It is the last science because to understand it we must to a certain extent have come to understand the other sciences. This “science,” to wit metaphysics, should be characterized thus: There is a science which investigates *being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature*. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences for none of these treats universally of being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attribute of this part.⁸

This conception of metaphysics as First Philosophy has historically been very influential. But the key criticisms of it, going back at least to Hume and Kant, also have been very influential and it seems to me rightly so for they seem sufficiently close to being decisive that such a metaphysician could only weakly defend him- or herself by a lot of very special and *ad hoc* modifications that would in effect eviscerate Aristotle’s bold and straightforward claim. John Passmore puts the standard criticism succinctly and well, as follows:

This Aristotelian notion of metaphysics rests on the assumption that “being” is the highest predicate in a series of predicates such as “mammalian living being,” “vertebrate living being,” “living being,” “being.” However, as Hume and Kant point out, “being” is

not an attribute. Nor has it attributes; pure being is indistinguishable from nothing.⁹

It should be noted that if instead of the Aristotelian way of talking what is substituted for it by the metaphysician is a characterization of First Philosophy as “the discipline which investigates existence as such and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature,” the same type criticism can be, and should be, made of such a conception. “Existence” is not an attribute in the sense in which “animate existence” is an attribute. Nor has existence attributes; “pure existence” is indistinguishable from nothing.

Let us now consider what might be regarded, though by some considerable stretch of our imagination and our reconstructive faculties, as a rational reconstruction of the above conception of metaphysics—a conception free of the above difficulties. Metaphysics (First Philosophy) is, on such a conception, construed as the attempt to arrive at a general description of the world. Moreover, it will be a general description that will show us what *must* be the case about the universe for human knowledge (including scientific knowledge) to be possible at all. Let us leave aside for now questions concerning whether what is supposed to be so generally described is (a) just the world as it is now or (b) in addition as it is likely to come to be or (c) in addition all possible worlds or (d) the world as it is and must be. (However, the above characterization makes it look like it should be [c] or [d]). It would be enough, perhaps, if it could provide a general description of the world (the universe) as it is, though (as the full characterization above makes evident) rationalist metaphysicians have generally wanted a description of the world as it is and *must* be.

It is not clear exactly what either is supposed to be. One possibility would be for it to be what P. F. Strawson has described as descriptive metaphysics, which gives a description of the world in terms of such very general concepts (some have called them, mistakenly I believe, “logical concepts”) such as thing, property, substance, individual, and process. (They leave the conceptual possibility for there being the nonphysical as well as the physical, since these concepts can be applied, if such there be, to the nonphysical as well.) When Thales said that everything is made of water, Anaximenes that everything is made of air, and Heraclitus that everything is made of fire, they were doing primitive physics and not metaphysics—just as much as the person who says everything is made of electrons or photons. This is of a type with Newton’s theory of gravitation or Descartes’s theory of

vortices. Descartes's theory of the *cogito*, by contrast, was part of metaphysics. His theory of vortices is a theory in physics or of speculative cosmology (a part, perhaps not a very reputable part, of physics). Physics, including speculative cosmology, describes and explains the world in terms of special types of physical objects and physical processes. It tries among other things to discover the fundamental physical particles or physical processes and to describe the world in terms of them. There will be, where the account is at all advanced, a lot of theory construction and perhaps logical and mathematical elaboration with the formalism that involves. But there will also be, and crucially, an appeal to empirical considerations. In support of Thales's hypothesis that everything is water, it could be pointed out that when humans and other animals get very hot their flesh turns to water. But someone doing metaphysics, including what Strawson called descriptive metaphysics, proceeds in a very different way. Parmenides was an early metaphysician when he denied the existence of non-being. We argue about the existence of non-being very differently from how we argue about the water hypothesis or the fire hypothesis. When Parmenides argued that there can be no such thing as non-being, for "we cannot know that which is not (that is, impossible), or utter it; for the same thing can be thought as can be," he didn't simply deny there was empty space, but employed what much later was to be called a transcendental argument. This was not to offer evidence for non-being as we might offer evidence for electrons or microbes, or for the hypothesis that everything is fire. It was rather to make a logical argument. The activities of Thales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus count as speculative cosmology—what we would now call physical cosmology—and what they did was very different from Parmenides' activity as a metaphysician. The former is primitive physics, the latter is primitive philosophy. No Quinean holism and naturalism should obscure that. The latter produced conceptual considerations designed to show that the very idea of the reality of non-being is incoherent. Similarly when a metaphysician such as Whitehead says that everything is in process or another metaphysician says there are only events or still another says there are no beliefs only believings, they are not offering empirical hypotheses such as everything is made of fire or frustrated people tend to respond with aggression. They are making arguments, allegedly transcendental arguments, with, if you will, transcendental hypotheses, designed, like Parmenides' argument, to show the necessity or the impossibility of something. They do not try to collect evidence, direct or indirect, for its truth. That would never provide the requisite necessity.

They do not try to confirm or disconfirm their claims; instead, they try to show by logical arguments that things *must* be this way. The metaphysician who says that everything is in process and the metaphysician who says that the most fundamental things are changeless substances are not making different evidential claims or experimental claims. Both of their claims are at least supposedly compatible with the same evidence, actual or conceivable; they differ about what is the best characterization of the evidence and they differ about the soundness of different logical arguments designed to show that things *must* be thus and so. But they do not differ about what is the relevant evidence, about any empirical hypothesis, or about any experimental matter.

Talk of philosophy as an attempt to give a general description of the whole universe reduces (if metaphysics is to be autonomous and distinct from science) to what descriptive metaphysicians seek to do as distinct from the scientific activity of speculative (physical) cosmology. Such a metaphysics attempts to describe the universe in terms of general concepts such as thing, property, substance, individual, and process, producing arguments of the same logical type as Parmenides' for saying that things *must* be so and so, rather than the designing of accounts, however ingenious, that need and can have experimental testing in addition to their theoretical elaboration. Metaphysicians say "The world *must* be made up of bare particulars," "There *must* be a single substance (a *substratum*) underlying all individual particular things," or "'Substance' is a disguised grammatical category, the underlying ultimate reality is process," or "There are only events"; and that is not at all like saying "There are only starlings in our neighborhood."

All such Parmenidian-like claims turn on the use of the appropriate terms, though the metaphysician is typically not aware of it, and if aware would try to provide grounds for rejecting such a claim. Moreover, for the metaphysician's claims to be justified, they must not only be, they must be known to be, *certainly true*.¹⁰ Moreover, their certainty is such that they neither stand in need of nor can they have experimental corroboration. But what the metaphysician actually does, though unwittingly, is in effect to show that this is the way we play one or another of our language-games. Their claims are what in the appropriate language-game Wittgenstein calls grammatical remarks. Something that really is non-being can't (logically can't) be a kind of thing or being. They, like other claims about use, are in reality *second-order* claims that depend for their truth on how the language is used. As in other such claims *about* concepts, they rest on empirical

claims about the use of words as such they are in principle testable by linguistics. Where the transcendental arguments are not established as valid along these lines, they result in either incoherencies or disguised recommendations to change our use of language. But they, where they are the latter, are not backed up by pragmatic, moral, or political considerations or even by considerations that would show that so speaking would be a clearer way to speak and to conceptualize things. Instead they are quite arbitrary. Moreover, even if they were so backed up by moral, political, or pragmatic considerations, they would not at all give us the *necessity* the metaphysician requires. That, as in the appeal to what is establishable by empirical linguistics (the only kind there is), would take us right out of philosophy altogether. "Things to be knowable must, directly or indirectly, be identifiable" is such a *second-order* disguised grammatical claim. There are as well, of course, *empirical* necessities of a perfectly unproblematic sort, such as "People must have food and water to survive." But the Aristotelian has not shown that there are any other types of claim that just *must* be so about the universe, namely, synthetic *a priori* necessities.

IV

All speculative philosophy, all systematic metaphysics, or all construction of far-ranging metaphysical systems do not, of course, operate with a Platonic conception of philosophy or even, gaining a little more realism, with a Platonic-Aristotelian conception of philosophy. I turn now to a consideration of another form of rationalism, Absolute Idealism, that makes somewhat different substantive claims and construes philosophy rather differently than the Platonic-Aristotelian conception. I shall stress the differences and see if this rationalism succeeds where the Platonic and Aristotelian varieties fail. In doing this I shall also try to make apparent the deep metaphysical drive that motivates this way of philosophizing. It is surely an impulse that attracts many to philosophy even after they are aware of how precarious this conception is.

Many regard the conflict between rationalism and empiricism as a, if not the, central issue in philosophy. Rationalism, many believe, represents metaphysical philosophizing while empiricism represents a purely critical anti-metaphysical philosophy, though some also claim either that there are many metaphysical residues in empiricism or that empiricism is itself a disguised metaphysics, all the worse for being unwitting. There are a few who even regard empiricism as quite properly metaphysical. I will set that

issue aside for another occasion. What should be said concerning the above issues will not bear on the soundness of my critique of Absolute idealism. They are quite independent issues. In a barrel of apples, a second bad apple added to the first does not improve the first. Here I shall concern myself with this form of rationalism (sometimes called critical rationalism) and its conception of philosophy, leaving aside the issue of “the metaphysics of logical positivism” for another day.

The traditional and standard way of distinguishing rationalism from empiricism is put by John Mackie in the following way:

Empiricism is the doctrine that all our knowledge is derived from experience or from observation and rationalism is the doctrine that to some extent at least our knowledge or some part of it is not derived from experience but is established by reason—either that “the intellect is a source of significant knowledge in its own right” or that “it necessarily cooperates with the senses in the production of knowledge.”¹¹

We have to make sure, in reflecting on this distinction, that we take “derived from experience” to mean “based on” or “justified by” or “grounded in” experience and not merely “arising from experience” or “coming from experience,” for rationalists could, and some do, claim that we come to know what we know through experience, that all knowledge, even mathematical knowledge, arises from our experience and we would not have it if we did not have that experience. (A favorite scholastic slogan is “There is nothing in the intellect that wasn’t first in the sense.”) The distinctive empiricist claim is not that, but that it is experience that justifies or grounds all our substantive knowledge claims. While, by contrast, the rationalist will say that at least some substantive knowledge claims require an appeal to reason and cannot be justified by making certain observations or relying on experiences or from being inferential knowledge derived from knowledge based on such experiential knowledge. For empiricists of all species (from Humeans to pragmatists), by contrast, there is only one kind of substantive truth: empirical truth. It is not only that there is only one way of knowing, namely, directly or indirectly through experience rather than through reason, but that there is only one kind of substantive truth. When we are clearheaded about things, we will come to recognize, as the Swedish empiricist Axel Hägerström stressed, that both “empirical reality” and “empirical knowledge” are pleonastic.¹² There are no substantive truths

other than truths assertive of matters of fact, and there are no objects such as Platonic forms or mathematical entities that transcend empirical reality for empirical reality is the only kind of reality there is or can be. The dispute between empiricism and rationalism has been about how we can know what we know, but it is also a dispute about the furniture of the universe for the empiricist is claiming that empirical reality is all there is and can be. There can only be this one way of knowing—appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, about what not only Leibniz, but Locke and Hume as well, called “truths of reason” as distinguished from “truths of fact”—because there is only one kind of reality, one (if you will) order of being, namely, empirical reality.

Platonists and Aristotelians, of course, resist this. But Absolute Idealists will as well. (I am thinking here of such philosophers as Georg Hegel, T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, and Brand Blanshard.) Absolute Idealists have a conception of a *total truth* (the whole of the truth, or *the truth*) to which all merely particular truths contribute.¹³ This total truth is somehow a “higher truth” than any mere matter of fact. Real knowledge, fully adequate explanations, and genuinely philosophical proofs must rest on a grasp of this total truth. Knowing a few scattered particular truths or even some scientific theories and connected commonsense claims isn’t enough. Ordinary empirical facts—the particular truths we discover or learn about in various ways—are not fully intelligible, they claim, without such a grasp of total truth. We have to see how things are connected and come to grasp the totality of things entire. Without that we will not have genuine knowledge.

We explain things by connecting one thing with another thing. You might explain your headache in the morning by all that cheap cognac you drank last night. And we can in turn explain that by appealing to certain empirical generalizations. But sooner or later—usually sooner rather than later—we will come to a generalization we use in explaining something that we cannot now explain by bringing in something still more general or indeed—or so the naturalist claim goes—in any other way. We can explain the falling of a snowflake, a raindrop, or a meteor by bringing it under the law of gravitation. If, in turn, the law of gravitation has been made precise, we can show that the earth and the snowflake are so connected that each pulls the other with a force varying directly with its mass and inversely with the square of the distance. Here we have given an explanation resting on an empirical generalization as wide as the law of gravitation. That is, empiricists will say, as complete an explanation as it is reasonable to ask for in this

context, and, they will add, all explanations are explanations given in some determinate context with some distinctive ends in view. Any explanation of the world is in fact an explanation of a part of the world or a collection of its parts because the world itself is not an entity in addition to the parts that make it up any more than Oxford University is something over and above its various colleges in their interrelations. Any explanation of fact must come to an end. It must halt somewhere with a generalization that is a pure statement of *de facto* togetherness. The law of gravitation is a general enough such statement to catch the various phenomena that there are or that it is reasonable to expect that there will *be*. If we had another law that explained the law of gravitation, the same would obtain for that, and so on, no matter how far back we go: no matter which explanation we light on. For any actual scheme of explanation of matters of fact, explanation will have to come to end by an appeal to a *de facto* togetherness. There is no escaping that. But such a law or cluster of laws, idealist metaphysicians (critical rationalists) claim, will still be (no matter how comprehensive) “opaque to reason.” This drives critical rationalists to another ideal of explanation. They, Blanshard puts it,

hold that when you end with any law whatever that is a mere statement of conjunction, your explanation is incomplete and you are bound to try at least to go beyond it. What leads them [rationalists] to say this? It is their sense of the goal that understanding is seeking, of what would bring the attempt to explain finally to rest. When you ask the question “Why?” you are seeking an answer of some kind, but of what kind? We can see with regard to some answers that we can raise the same questions again of others that we cannot because we have already reached the end of the line. Suppose you remark that two straight lines do not enclose a space, or that whatever is colored is extended, or that a thing cannot at once have a property and not have it, and suppose now some bright skeptic asks you why. Could you give him an answer? I do not think you could, not because there is an answer that you don’t know, but because anyone who understood your remark would know the answer already and would be asking a silly question. When you have a law that connects things by a *self-evident necessity*, the question “Why?” has no point, for the kind of insight you have is just the kind you are asking for. If you see that A *must* be B, the further question “Why?” is meaningless.¹⁴

What, Blanshard has it, would bring our search for understanding, for an explanation of how things hang together, finally to rest would be a *seen necessity* that things *must* be this way, that they *must* hang together in this way and not in another. Without it we have no full understanding of the world.¹⁵ But it is exactly this that philosophy tries to give us. The critical rationalist “is a person who assumes that behind every *is* there is a *must*, that if snow is white or fire burns or John has a cold, the question ‘Why?’ has an answer, and that this answer would disclose a necessity.”¹⁶ Philosophy, in such a view, “is an attempt to carry understanding to its furthest possible limits. It brings into the picture the foundations on which science builds and the arches and vaultings that hold its structures together. Philosophy is at once the criticism and completion of science.”¹⁷

We human beings have a deep drive to understand. We are the sort of beings who want to understand the world we live in. In doing so, we want, rationalists believe, to understand the very scheme of things entire. We want a rationally disciplined, justified vision of the whole. We want to make our world intelligible. We will not rest content with an account, no matter how systematically generalized, abstract, clarified, and confirmed, that the universe is thus and so. We want to be able to see that it must be so; that it could not be otherwise; that the only really possible world is the actual world. We want to come to understand that that it is so is a rational necessity.

We cannot *prove*, most rationalists agree, that it must be so, and it certainly is not so because we, in our quest for understanding, *want* it to be so. Bertrand Russell, Richard Robinson, and J. L. Mackie are perfectly justified in their scoffing criticisms of such a move. But for the rationalist, the world being such is a postulate. “For the critical rationalist,” as Blanshard puts it, “the intelligibility of things is neither a necessary conclusion nor an arbitrary assumption, but a postulate, that is a proposition which for practical purposes he must assume and which experience progressively confirms but which is incapable of present proof.”¹⁸ Such a rationalist, Blanshard continues, indeed has a faith. His “faith is that there is to be found in the universe the kind of intelligibility that would satisfy his intellect.”¹⁹ And the kind of intelligibility that would satisfy his intellect is “that there is a coincidence between reality and his intellectual ideal, that at every point there is an answer to his question ‘Why?’”²⁰ There must be, that is, if our demand for a complete understanding is to be satisfied, *synthetic necessary features* of reality. There are some things that are not merely the case, but must be the case. Indeed everything, some rationalists

believe, must have that kind of necessity. The critical rationalist needs not just synthetic necessary principles, but a synthetic necessary reality. Rationalists are in search of certainty; they believe that they will find it in one or more rationally necessary synthetic *a priori* truths or, more characteristically for a critical rationalist, who is also an Absolute Idealist, in a whole system of such truths and thus in one system of indubitable truth: rationalists of this stripe go holistic about truth and meaning. Such a system of absolutely certain *a priori* truths seen (rationally apprehended) itself to be an absolutely certain *a priori* truth is perhaps what Absolute Idealists mean by "total truth." It is only with this, they have it, that our quest for understanding can legitimately stop.

Even on the quest for certainty with respect to the data of our experience, we will end up being pushed, rationalists claim, into a belief that what they are experiences of are rationally necessary features of the world. Some of what we directly observe may be in a way infallibly true, but still only empirically so. There indeed seem to be kinds of direct observation that never actually go wrong. They could be called empirically infallible observations.²¹ But "since it would be merely a matter of fact that such observations never go wrong, to know this would be to know an empirical universal proposition. Consequently, even when we were using such an empirically infallible kind of observation, we would not know infallibly that it was infallible. In this respect empirical certainty, if such is to be had, would always fall short of absolute certainty."²² It thus would not meet rationalist expectations: it would not satisfy the rationalist's quest for certainty or her quest for complete understanding.

Rationalism is not only a doctrine that the mind (as some somehow nonphysical, nonempirical reality) either on its own or with the help of the senses is a source and ground of knowledge, but it is committed as well to a doctrine of synthetic necessary existences or relations. It is a metaphysical view "of what not merely is so but must be so—*must* in some sense that is not merely logical or linguistic or subjective."²³ A consistent empiricism, or any end of philosophy anti-metaphysical view, will reject both that there are *synthetic necessary truths* and that there are *a priori* or somehow rationally necessary features of reality. (This is not to deny the existence of *empirically necessary* features of reality, e.g., that human beings built as they are cannot survive without oxygen or that some states of affairs obtain prior to and independently of human societies and their arrangements.)²⁴ The career of reason, they will claim, becomes a form of unreason or transcendental illusion when it makes such claims.

V

Let us look at some of the reasons why it is so widely believed that such a rationalism—indeed the very conception of such a philosophy—rests on a mistake.

We have seen that it is essential for rationalism that we can establish that at least some knowledge (for some rationalists, e.g., Absolute Idealists, all genuine knowledge) of substantive matters of fact, of what is and, indeed in some (perhaps all) instances, must be, is *established by reason*. But this is not all that is being claimed by critical rationalists. They believe also that in the seeking of real knowledge, fully adequate and complete explanations, we cannot rest short of *total truth*, that is, *the truth*, *the whole truth*, that particular truths contribute to but do not, even when simply taken together, constitute. Total truth is a “higher truth” than any mere matter of fact or collection of matters of fact. It is an objective synthetic necessity and indeed a holistic one.

Such a claim, it is widely believed, is at best utterly groundless and at worst incoherent. We have no clear understanding, or perhaps no understanding at all, of what we are talking about in speaking of the total truth. Moreover, a given true statement, for example, “Pau is to the west of Aix,” can be true, indeed it can be “wholly true,” without being the whole of the truth. We know or at least reasonably believe many statements to be true without having any clear idea of what it would be to have the whole of the truth or total truth. We might record in a big book (or rather many big books) all the truths that we know, but that would be just a collection of the many things that turned out to be in fact so. Indeed, many things that are in fact so are hardly things that *must* be so; tomorrow we might discover or come to know more truths and for any time whatsoever that would be so. But no matter how many books we filled up with our recorded truths, we would not know whether we had, or had even approximated, total truth—the whole of the truth. We might go on to note the interconnections between these particular true statements and that would give us some more truths. But no matter how carefully we did this, we would not have total truth. Indeed, it is not even evident that we would be any nearer total truth. We could carefully and perspicuously arrange these truths into a coherent pattern. This would be one way of arranging things, perhaps a useful or insightful way. It is not clear, however, that it would give us any more truth than we had before; but whether it would or not, it would not take us closer to the whole of the truth, to a higher total truth. We have no

idea of what it would be like to have *the totality* of the facts; we do not know what it would be like to have discovered all there is. And even if we did, we would not have discovered anything that *must* be the case. We would have discovered just a *de facto* something or other, albeit a rather extraordinary one. We would not have discovered that the universe must be such and such a way. We could discover that a very considerable number of things were so and that they hang together in a certain way. We could also come to see that we could organize our way of speaking of them in such a way that, for our purposes at least, would be insightful and useful. But we would have no idea of whether this would be the total truth or what it would be like to improve things such that finally we had grasped the sorry scheme of things entire and had obtained total truth. And we have no idea what it would be like to discover a “higher truth” than any matter of fact or set or sets of matters of fact or to have discovered that there are some states of affairs that must, simply must—logically or *a priori* must—be so.²⁵ We hardly can reasonably require that a fully adequate understanding, a complete explanation, or genuine knowledge would require us to know some something we know not what.

Though talking about truth in this way is characteristic of rationalism, particularly in its Absolute Idealist forms, *perhaps* rationalism can be plausibly articulated without that obscure claim. Rationalists are on the quest for certainty. They want, as we have seen, not just an empirical certainty—some statements that are as a matter of empirical fact always so and that there is not the slightest actual reason to doubt that they are true. They want, instead, *absolute* certainty. They want to be able to show that there are rationally necessary synthetic *a priori* truths and thus that there are *absolutely* indubitable truths revealing rationally necessary features of the world: synthetic necessary existences and relations.

Empiricists, and a whole battery of latter-day analytic philosophers (who may or may not be empiricists), have always doubted that there are such synthetic necessary existences or relations or any synthetic necessary truths beyond very general statements of empirical necessity such as we often get in physics. To make again a point it is essential not to lose sight of, beyond empirical necessities (e.g., deprive a human being of food and he will starve to death), there is no reason to believe that we will get *a priori* synthetic necessities revealing such synthetic necessary features of the world. Consider Blanshard’s examples of such alleged necessities: “Two straight lines do not enclose a space,” “Whatever is colored is extended,” “A thing cannot at once have a property and not have it.”²⁶ These are necessary

truths, but they are not synthetic for their necessity rests on the meanings, the uses, of words in English and equivalent expression in other languages. It, for example, is things that are colored and things are by definition extended such that “an extended thing” like “four-sided square” is a redundancy. Or consider what Blanshard calls the “propositions of vast importance, which the scientist makes use of every day of his life,” and which, Blanshard has it, the metaphysician must show to be necessary truths revealing synthetic necessary features of the world:

1. We can learn the facts of the physical order through perception.
2. The laws of our logic are valid of the physical order.
3. There is a public space and a public time in which things happen and to which we all have access.
4. Every event has a cause.
5. That under like conditions the same sort of thing has always happened and always will.
6. That we ought to adjust the degree of assent to any proposition to the extent of evidence for it.²⁷

Like “All colored things are extended,” these six propositions are supposed to be synthetic *a priori* necessary truths. They differ from “All colored things are extended” only in being less obviously self-evident necessary truths. We may not immediately recognize them to be self-evident, but careful philosophical reflection will, Blanshard believes, show them to be such. But when we actually inspect these six propositions we see that they are a mixed bag and that none of them has the kind of absolute certainty and self-evidence that Blanshard claims.

Propositions 2, 4, and 6 have been thought to be false by able philosophers or logician-mathematicians. Intuitionists in mathematics and logic have argued that the law of the excluded middle, far from being self-evident and applying to our world, does not actually hold. We should, they argue, reject it. That such a fundamental law of logic could be so challenged should make us cautious about the status of the others.²⁸ Beyond that, and I expect more importantly, it is not clear what it means to say that they are valid of our world other than what it means to say that arithmetic and geometry are valid of our world. That they can be fruitfully applied to our physical order seems a well-established *empirical* fact, established quite unproblematically by showing how useful and indispensable they are to our

reasoning and calculations. However, we do not require metaphysics for support of empirical facts. Proposition 4 is now thought to be false by many philosophers of science because they have had to consider quantum mechanics. That quantum mechanics can be given deterministic readings shows only that things are problematic here. We do not have anything like a *seen* necessity, if we have any necessity at all; that we sometimes think we do may result from confusing the definitional truism “Every effect has a cause” with proposition 4. Proposition 6 is also problematic, though in a less familiar way. Yet anyone strongly influenced by Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* will have a sense of how problematic (indeed, possibly false) it is. Take the propositions “Human beings have heads”; “If they lose their heads new ones will not grow on them”; “I have a head”; “Water boils when heated”; “Water is wet”; “There is an external world”; “There are several human beings”; “Human beings do not turn into turtles”; “Ice is colder than fire.” All these propositions, with the possible exception of “Water is wet,” have at least the look of empirical propositions. They do not seem to be true by definition or by stipulation. Nonetheless, we do not adjust our assent to these propositions to the degree of our evidence for them. We are certain of them even though they are not analytic, and the idea of giving evidence for them seems at least to be very strange. Indeed, to some of us, it seems absurd. Anything that could count as evidence for these propositions would be no more certain than they are, and we have no idea of what it would be like to have evidence against them. Anything I could give as evidence for my not having a head would be, to understate it, much less certain than the proposition that I have a head; the same thing is true for the generalization “Live human beings have heads” as well as the other propositions I listed. They have the look at least of empirical propositions, but it is entirely unclear whether we adjust the degree of assent to these propositions to the extent of our evidence for them. We are certain of them, but we do not seem to have any evidence for them. What some might call “evidence” is such that were we to try to give it, it would be concluded that we had gone insane rather than take it as evidence (e.g., talking about my feeling around my shoulders and concluding that after all I really didn’t have a head anymore). Some might remain unhappy with this Wittgensteinian turn here. They might, though I think mistakenly, take it to be an evasion. But this is only a further reason for saying we are far from having a self-evident *seen* necessity here.²⁹

Proposition 3 may be true by definition and non-substantive. “Public space” and “public time” are arguably redundancies. They just, given what

space is and what time is, are public. By definition space is the place where things happen, and “a *timeless intrinsically* private happening” is a contradiction in terms, or at least so it is not implausible to argue. And if they are in public space, they are by definition things to which we all have access. So, on the most natural reading proposition 3, though less clearly so, should (like “All colored things are extended”) be a definitional and non-substantive truth. It is vague enough to be taken as some other kind of claim, probably an empirical claim, but certainly not as a seen rational necessity: an *a priori* synthetic truth, carrying the certainty of such a truth.

Proposition 5 is sufficiently vague that under certain readings, it is false; under other readings, it is like a very vague definitional truth; and under what is probably the most natural reading, the first part is a true empirical generalization and the second part (i.e., “and always will”) a prediction that is probably true. Take “Jasper always gets drunk after a fight with his wife.” The like condition is that “Jasper has a fight with his wife,” but it may be false that Jasper always gets drunk when he has a fight with his wife. If so, it is not, as a matter of fact, true that under like conditions the same thing always happens. If in turn someone says, “Well, if the same thing doesn’t happen then the conditions are not like,” then he is turning it into a definitional and non-substantive truth. What is more likely is that he will treat it as a proposition that could be false, but that just, in fact, turns out in all the examined cases to be true, and he makes a plausible guess about the future and predicts that it will hold in the future.

Finally, proposition 1 seems to me truistic. It is either a disguised definitional commonplace or an empirical commonplace about how we learn about many things; it is no self-evident seen synthetic necessity. Even its alleged commonplace status is not plainly true. Phenomenalists, subjective idealists, and some kinds of realists think we perceive only *sensa* or sense-data and that we infer (mistakenly or otherwise) physical objects from these data of sense, data that are not physical objects or part of the surface of physical objects. In any event, proposition 1 is not plainly a seen substantive rational necessity. It looks like to learn about the physical order at all, we have to allow for perception or else we would not understand what it would mean to learn about the physical order. If we might, as we might, wish to leave that open, then we either have an empirical claim or just some kind of muddle where we do not know what is going on. In any event we do not have a rational self-evident necessity. Where we get something that seems like a rational necessity, here we get something like a definitional truth.

What we have here (*pace* Blanshard) with this mixed bag of propositions is not a cluster of self-evident truths presupposed by science and without which science totters.³⁰ We have no reason (again *pace* Blanshard) to believe that metaphysics is the continuation of the career of reason “into regions that science leaves unexplored,” which provides the rational “foundations on which science builds arches and vaultings that hold its structures together.”³¹ We have, with these propositions, sometimes propositions so vague that nothing very definite can be said about them; at other times and under certain readings, empirical truisms that could be false (though they are highly unlikely to be) and that yield no *absolute* certainty; at other times empirical propositions that are very likely false; and at still other times putative disguised definitional truths that, taken in a certain way, are indeed definitionally true, but then are non-substantive. In any event, we do not have here the metaphysical truths or even metaphysical falsehoods of vast importance claimed by critical rationalists.

VI

Some might agree that these criticisms are on the mark and still respond that not enough credit is being given to the deep underlying motivation of the critical rationalist: her drive for complete understanding and the importance of this drive. This should be carefully thought through, the claim goes, and when this is done, then perhaps something of her project can be salvaged or at least we can see how much we have lost something in giving it up.³² It is—to begin to respond to them—at least arguably unproblematic about the doing of philosophy that philosophers standardly and understandably want to see how things hang together in the broadest sense of the term. So construed, this does not require rationalist metaphysics or any metaphysics at all or even any philosophy viewed as constituting a discipline with a distinctive method, the proposed use of which enables the philosopher to make distinctive autonomous knowledge claims yielding something that could properly be called philosophical knowledge. The seeing things together could be a Matthew Arnold-like seeing things together rather than a Spinoza-like or Blanshard-like seeing things together. The rationalist claim, powerfully exemplified in Spinoza, is that simply an Arnold-like moralistic seeing of how things hang together, or even a more Hume-like or Santayana-like empirically naturalistic seeing of how things hang together, will at best only give us a *de facto* togetherness, a *de facto* hanging together, that in the end rests on a mere description of how

things happen to be and not an explanation of how things are and indeed *must* be.³³

Even when giving physical explanations of the movements of the physical universe (to perhaps be pleonastic), we end up appealing to the law of gravitation; but we could still very well say that it is just a brute fact that that law is true, and we could in turn ask on what that brute fact is based. If we proceed empirically here, we do indeed, as we have seen, get necessities, but not, Blanshard and rationalists generally would have it, the right kind of necessities. Blanshard points out that in attempting to explain our world by seeking a systematic set of empirical laws, statements of general connection sustaining counterfactuals, we just get *de facto* necessities. We get laws that give to understand, for example, that a shot put ball dropped from a window will fall, and even if it is not dropped, it still would fall if it were to be dropped. Still, the counterfactual sustaining of the necessity of its happening is nothing more than a *de facto* necessity resting on theory-informed observation. We might finally explain this happening by appealing to the law of gravitation; and it might someday become possible to explain the law of gravitation (as Einstein late in his life hoped to do) by giving a still more general statement of the same type, namely, a theory-embedded statement of general connection. But, or so it is being claimed by the empiricist and the pragmatist, it will be with such a type of general law-like statement, plus a description, that explanation will come to rest. It will, that is, be a *de facto* claim and not a claim to have apprehended a self-evident rational necessity.³⁴

The rationalist will respond that, if we are really reflective, if we have a drive to understand our world in the fullest way possible, we will not be content to end with such a claim that this is just the way things are. That leaves us, if we rest content with that *de facto* necessity, the rationalist says, with a radical contingency. As rational, reflective beings, we want, if we can get it, an explanation that finally brings the quest for explanation to a resting place in an objective, *a priori* rational necessity that is not just a *de facto* necessity. We explain *A* by an appeal to *B* and *B* by an appeal to *C* and *C* by an appeal to *D* and so on, where the same type question can be asked about *D* as can be asked about *C* as can be asked about *B* as can be asked about *A*. We want an answer for which the same type of question cannot be asked again because we have finally come to the point from which we cannot raise the same type of question again, or any kind of question, because we have finally found a law “that connects things by self-evident necessity.”³⁵

Where we do not get that, we have not yet, rationalists claim, fully understood, fully comprehended, how things are and must be. Their underlying belief—assumption if you will—is that behind every *is* there is a *must* and, indeed, a *must* that is not a mere *de facto* empirical necessity. That salmon return to the rivers from the sea, that it is warmer in France than in Finland have, if pushed far enough, an answer, the critical rationalists claim, that rests in a self-evident rational necessity: something that can be apprehended to be a rational necessity by a sufficiently reflective mind who has carefully turned things over.³⁶ We cannot, they admit, prove that this *must* be so. But it is, as we have seen Blanshard remark, the faith of critical rationalists that it is so and their deepest impulse in philosophizing is to articulate sound reasons, though something they grant that *must* be weaker than a proof, for believing it to be so. To satisfy their intellect, they are bound to go beyond the empiricist's or non-metaphysician's search for a mere *de facto* hanging together of things. Neither their intellect nor their emotions will be satisfied with anything else and presumably ours will not be either if we would be maximally reflective. That the universe should have this kind of intelligibility—this kind of rational necessity—is something, critical rationalists believe, that is necessary to satisfy our intellect's deepest need for understanding. What would bring our search for an explanation of how things hang together finally to an end would be a seen rational necessity that things *must* hang together in a certain way: that no other way is even fully intelligible. Our drive for understanding, for intelligibility, is such that we will not rest content with an account that the universe just happens to be thus and so, no matter how generalized and systematic (the various items being clearly seen as a matter of fact to be hanging together), no matter how abstract, how well classified and confirmed. We want, instead, to see that it *must*—and not just *factually must*—be so. We want to show that the only really possible world is the actual world. We want to come to see that it is so as a rational necessity. We want to see that the rational is the real and the real is the rational.

It is surely rational to want to explain our world, to want to make sense of it. But this comes to many different relatively concrete things from an understanding of how people (parents and children, siblings, lovers, colleagues) relate to each other, to how political structures work, to an understanding of the underlying motivations of human beings, to understanding of molecular structures, to understanding how and why birds migrate as they do. Literature and the sciences (natural and social) want to understand various of these things and sometimes some of us want to see a

bit, if we can, how these disparate things hang together. But none of this requires the ideal of explanation held by critical rationalists. Given what we know and what we have achieved in the way of explanations (typically itself a pragmatic notion in its actual function), it is unrealistic and indeed even unreasonable to expect to gain such “complete explanations” ending in seen rational necessities (whatever they are).³⁷ None of the putative self-evident necessities claimed by the rationalists have been shown to be at one and the same time (a) self-evident, (b) necessary, (c) *a priori*, and (d) substantive (synthetic). The faith of the critical rationalist is irrational and not because it is faith, but because it is a faith in something that is at best unachievable and at worst incoherent. It is not only that we have not discovered any of the requisite self-evident necessities, but also that we have good theoretical reasons for believing we cannot, for anything (if there is anything) that is self-evident, *a priori*, and necessary will be analytic (true in virtue of its meaning alone). Dissatisfaction with this, while still sticking to conceptions of the *a priori*, results from Kant’s overly narrow characterization of analytic propositions as propositions whose predicate is contained in the subject. All logically necessary (analytic) propositions are not of the subject-predicate type. Moreover, if Quine is right and there are no analytic or *a priori* propositions (all propositions being empirical), there being just grades of empirical necessity, that is even worse news for the rationalists. In fine, none of their examples work and we have good theoretical reasons for believing that none can.

VII

The rationalist makes us feel by a form of linguistic *legerdemain* that if her ideal of explanation fails, our condition is a sorry one indeed. We are left with contingencies such that things could come crashing down around us, that things would be inexplicable, and that we would have no systematic understanding of the world, for we would have no necessities (law-like statements sustaining contrary to fact conditionals) and thus (*sic*) no systematic understanding of the world. But the sciences, and increasingly so, are yielding such knowledge and, given that there are plenty of systematically related *de facto* necessities about, we are not left baffled: our necessities are not what rationalists call “rational necessities,” but they are systematically related empirical necessities strong enough to sustain counterfactuals. They yield a very considerable understanding. Looking for “total truth” and such “complete explanations,” without which we would

not have fully explained or really understood anything until we have understood everything, only distracts us from the actual tasks—tasks taken on by science, literature, and by pragmatists and various critical theorists as well—of explaining our world in non-transcendental terms.³⁸ Rationalists believe there are synthetic necessary features of reality that we, without the need for observation and theoretical elaboration, just typically after careful reflection, directly know by intellectual insight or somehow establish by reason.³⁹ The very idea of such *a priori* synthetic necessary features of the world is incoherent and the idea of such intellectual insight and establishing of things by reason is as well.

These incoherences are even more evident when we go beyond the claim that there are such synthetic necessary realities, assertible by synthetic *a priori* propositions, directly knowable (though perhaps not immediately and only after reflection) to be self-evidently true by pure reason to the additional claim, central to Absolute Idealist forms of rationalism, that the universe is an organic whole such that there are essential connections between every aspect of reality.⁴⁰ Every event in the universe, on such a conception, is *necessarily* connected with every other event. It is only because of our ignorance that some seem merely externally and contingently connected. Thus causal connections (*pace* Hume, Russell, and the logical empiricists) are really necessary connections. The universe, as an organic whole, is “a causal and intelligible system in which every part is necessarily linked to every other. The complete explanation of anything would in the end involve everything. The world is a whole in which there are no accidents and no loose ends.”⁴¹ Everything, on such a conception, is so intimately connected with everything else that there is no possibility of really understanding any aspect of the universe without a grasp of the ways in which this aspect relates to absolutely everything else. This is why the universe is said to be an organic whole: a whole such that it is essential to each part that it be a part of that whole. Relations, to the extent they are real, are all internal.

Together with all the other rather more mundane incoherencies here, we have the incoherent essentialist holism of organic wholes. Perhaps it is not the case, as analytic orthodoxy holds, that Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore decisively refuted Absolute Idealism by showing the incoherency of the doctrine of internal relations and thus of the notion that the universe is an organic whole.⁴² Russell himself argued that Absolute Idealists such as F. H. Bradley and H. Joachim were committed to the false dogma that all relations are internal, but he then added, significantly, that there was no

way of showing that such defenders of the dogma were mistaken without begging the question at issue.⁴³ Moore responded that we could show that such a dogma was a mistake without begging the question by using a method that appealed to common sense in a way he later famously did in arguing against skepticism. Against the Absolute Idealist claim that all relations are internal relations and that thus the universe is an organic whole, Moore pointed out that he could show such an idealist that his belief in internal relations was inconsistent with other beliefs that he would not be prepared to deny. This being so, the Absolute Idealist, not wishing to be inconsistent, would abandon the claim that all relations are internal. What the doctrine of internal relations would require him to deny, and what Moore thought he would not be willing to deny, is such everyday mundane contingencies as that he might not now be thinking about the things that he is thinking about. But, Moore asserted, he would not deny that and indeed could not deny that if he wanted to maintain any credibility at all. The Absolute Idealist could, of course, reject the common-sense truism, and Joachim did just that in his reply to Moore.⁴⁴ So it has been said that Moore, after all, did not achieve anything non-question begging. But to this, it has been responded that “faced with a choice between a philosophical principle—that all relations are internal—and a commonsense truism—that I might not be thinking about the things that I am thinking about—the burden of proof surely lies on upholders of the philosophical principle.”⁴⁵ This is, indeed, a weaker claim than my claim that the proposition that the universe is an organic whole is incoherent, but, given that it is a doctrine that is difficult to take seriously, this burden of proof argument brings out how very arbitrary and pointless such a metaphysical claim is. It is plainly, to understate it, not something that we are forced to if we would be through and through rational. The heart of rationalism, critical or otherwise, is irrational.

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NOTES

1. “The real metaphysical stuff” is, of course, persuasively defined, though, as C. L. Stevenson pointed out, not all persuasive definitions need be arbitrary. As my subsequent discussion makes clear, and what the immediate context of the use of that phrase gives to understand, “the real metaphysical stuff” consists in both a systematic (sometimes holistic) approach to philosophy and an account in which some form of philosophical or metaphysical knowledge-claims are proffered as being distinguishable from scientific or commonsense

knowledge. A holistic naturalistic “metaphysics” such as we find in W. V. Quine, David Armstrong, or J. J. C. Smart—what Hilary Putnam mockingly calls “metaphysics within the limits of science alone”—is a broad, synthesizing view of the world, employing, in addition to logical analysis, scientific method or at least, where the claims are substantive, empirical methods. It, with its rejection of First Philosophy, does not count as the real metaphysical stuff, for it is (a) fallibilistic and (b) not, as Blanshard puts it, “at once the criticism and completion of science” yielding the rational foundation of science. It is this latter sort of thing that the great philosophical tradition sought. A domesticated metaphysics within the limits of science alone reveals how captive it is (and rightly so in my view) of the critique of the tradition developed by logical positivism, pragmatism, and (in effect, though not in rhetoric) in Wittgensteinian ways of philosophizing. The exchange over scientism between Putnam and Quine is revealing in this respect. Hilary Putnam, “Meaning Holism” in Lewis Edwin Hahn and Paul Arthur Schilpp, eds., *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 405–26 and Quine’s reply about scientism in the same volume, 430–31.

2. I do not mean to suggest that the three philosophical projects I consider are exhaustive of the projects there are in philosophy. My own project of philosophy as critical theory (my pragmatic form of critical theory) is quite distinct from them. Indeed, there are many different philosophical projects that I do not even gesture at here. The three are not even intended to be exhaustive of metaphysical philosophizing; they are meant to capture what I take to be—here making a judgment call—the three most significant forms of metaphysical theory not operating within the parameters of a metaphysics (as in Michael Dummett, for example, or David Armstrong), in accordance with the analytic paradigm of what metaphysics should be. See my “On Transforming Philosophy,” *Dalhousie Review* 67 (Winter 1987): 439–56. I discuss in some detail the first two options I briefly discuss in sections 2 and 3 in my “C. D. Broad’s Conception of Critical and Speculative Philosophy,” *Dialectica* (forthcoming), in my “On there being Philosophical Knowledge,” *Theoria* 56 (1990): part 3, 173–93, and in my *Getting Straight about Philosophy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), chaps. 1 and 2.

3. John Passmore, “Philosophy” in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 6 (New York: Macmillan), 222. See, as well, his “The Place of Argument in Metaphysics” in W. E. Kennick and Morris Lazerowitz, eds., *Metaphysics, Reading and Reappraisals* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 356–65 and his *Philosophical Reasoning* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1961), 1–80, 119–47.

4. Passmore, “Philosophy,” 222.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 221.

7. See references in note 2 and Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism, Essays 1972–1980* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), introduction and chap. 12.

8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1003a, 19–25.

9. Passmore, “Philosophy,” 220.

10. For those philosophers Blanshard identifies as critical rationalists (Absolute Idealists), genuinely philosophical claims have a distinctive logical status. They are synthetic *a priori* necessities. They are, as well, propositions that are self-evident, though often their self-evidence is not immediately evident, but the claim is that they can be seen to be self-evident and certain as a result of careful philosophical examination. This comes to careful reflection and thought. We do the trick, that is, with “pure reason.” There is no claim in my text that they will be found to be immediately self-evident. The self-evidence of some, perhaps all, the propositions in question may be seen only as a result of hard philosophical work. Absolute Idealists are holists and this, where they are being careful, would also involve a holism about the meaning of propositions. But the resultant system of propositions allegedly yields us

a priori knowledge that is substantive, infallible, and certain. Without that kind of knowledge our persistent asking of “Why?” could not, they believe, have a suitable conclusion. We, of course, do have synthetic necessities that are not *a priori* or certain, but they will not yield the kind of “philosophical knowledge” critical rationalists seek. Their seeking such knowledge is perfectly understandable (it is a deep and persistent metaphysical quest), but I argue in the text that that notwithstanding such conceptions rest on a mistake. Brand Blanshard, “The Philosophic Enterprise” in Charles J. Bontempo and S. Jack Odell, eds., *The Owl of Minerva: Philosophers on Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 163–77. See also his “In Defense of Metaphysics” in Kennick and Lazerowitz, eds., *Metaphysics*, 331–55.

11. John Mackie, “Rationalism and Empiricism” in his *Logic and Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 42. See also W. H. Walsh, *Reason and Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 166–67; Hans Reichenbach, “Rationalism and Empiricism” in Kennick and Lazerowitz, eds., *Metaphysics*, 38–48.

12. Axel Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion*, R. T. Sandin, trans. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), 17–99. See, for some related ideas expressed very differently, John Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962). See John Mackie on Anderson in his *Logic and Knowledge*, 1–21 and John Passmore’s introduction to *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*. Quine, of course, is committed to a similar claim, but his fascination with mathematics leads him to wrap it in wool.

13. A. M. Quinton, “Absolute Idealism” in Anthony Kenny, ed., *Rationalism, Empiricism and Idealism: British Academy Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 124–50.

14. Blanshard, “The Philosophic Enterprise,” 165–66.

15. *Ibid.*, 165.

16. *Ibid.*, 166.

17. *Ibid.*, 176–77.

18. *Ibid.*, 166. Talk of “*present* proof” is strange. It makes it sound like an empirical hypothesis we do not yet have enough evidence for or a theorem we are trying to prove, know is provable, but have not yet succeeded in proving. But for Blanshard it is none of these things. Yet if we can’t prove it now, what sort of procedures should we use, or methods should we adopt, that might eventually lead to a proof? We are left entirely up in the air here. I think talk of proof or even possible proof here is arm waving.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Mackie, “Rationalism and Empiricism,” 56.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 53.

24. I deliberately mix levels of abstraction with these examples of empirical necessities. The first is a commonsense truism; the second ought to be. But the second is a claim some philosophers go around making. *If* to accept the second is to be a commonsense realist, then I am wholeheartedly a commonsense realist.

25. The critical rationalists are very likely to say their “must” is neither an empirical, logical, nor a postulatory “must” but some sort of *sui generis*, but still in some way *a priori*, metaphysical “must”—see the quotation from Mackie (note 23)—but it is utterly obscure what this metaphysical “must” is.

26. Blanshard, “The Philosophic Enterprise,” 165.

27. *Ibid.*, 173.

28. I reject several of Blanshard’s putative synthetic *a priori* necessary truths partly on the grounds that able philosophers and logicians have disputed them. But, it is natural to ask, why should this be deemed relevant? If, as I grant, work (i.e., careful reflective examination) is needed to establish (if indeed it can be established) that such propositions are synthetic

a *priori* truths, it is not at all surprising that intelligent and informed people are sometimes mistaken in making such claims or in not recognizing that certain propositions have this status, though critical rationalists ought to hold that anyone who possesses a clear and distinct understanding of such propositions will recognize their truth. However, their meaning holism will also lead them to the belief that a clear and distinct understanding of an explicitly formulated proposition can require hard work. Some philosophers or logicians who are not being sufficiently careful might fail to see that they are self-evident synthetic *a priori* propositions when they actually are. Intuitionist logicians might just be wrong about the law of the excluded middle. That a putative self-evident proposition is not accepted as self-evident or even as true by every informed person does not show that it is not self-evident. That notwithstanding, where proof is not available (such as proving a theorem in mathematics or logic) or an experimental test is not available, as it is in the hard sciences, the fact that there is disagreement on the part of informed and careful people is at the very least worrisome. In such situations, burden of proof considerations come to the fore. The “test”—though hardly properly so called—for whether something is or is not self-evident is that people, or at least properly informed people, in the relevant domains, will, on careful reflection, think it so. But this leaves the claim to self-evidence particularly problematic when there is informed dissent. When some, after careful reflection, think a proposition to be self-evident and some do not, why side, lacking tests for self-evidence, with those claiming self-evidence? Perhaps, after all, the proposition is self-evident, but when it does not seem so to some informed others, a thoughtful person will be skeptical about the self-evidence of the proposition. Here, at least, an extensive consensus is very important and then (if we get that) it will be the *consensus* not the self-evidence that counts. But where it is just numbers that count—where it is like a vote issue—we can hardly reasonably claim self-evidence. Lacking a method for the resolving of differences, we are, as Peirce saw, stuck with something very subjective.

29. It has been suggested that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein draws a different moral than I do from the role of truisms like “Human beings have heads and if they lose them new ones will not grow on them” and thus, the claim continues, I have misappropriated Wittgenstein. His moral is that claims like “I have a head,” which look like empirical propositions, really are not but actually function much more like rules. The reality is that Wittgenstein draws both morals and that he links them. Someone who tried to doubt that he had a head and searched for evidence for his head would, on Wittgenstein’s account, be rightly regarded as insane. Nothing that he could give as evidence would be as certain as that he had a head. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969). See Norman Malcolm’s discussion of it in “The Groundlessness of Belief” in Stuart C. Brown, ed., *Reason and Belief* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 143–57. See also the final chapter from his *Nothing is Hidden: Wittgenstein’s Criticism of his Early Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). A very careful account of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* is given by G. H. von Wright in *Wittgenstein* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 165–82. Finally, even if I did misread Wittgenstein here, my claim stands on its own. Any evidence we could give for human beings having heads would be no more certain than the proposition itself. For a person to doubt that he had a head would be a plain mark of insanity. And, incidentally, *pace* Wittgenstein, it would take a lot of stretching to plausibly construe “Live people have heads” as a rule or even rule-like.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 176–77. Another critic remarks that I am fideistic about science. Well, if to be fideistic about science is to believe that in ascertaining what the facts of the matter are that scientific ways of proceeding have turned out to be more adequate ways of fixing beliefs about matters of fact than the alternatives, then I am fideistic about science. It seems to me Peirce and Dewey have been quite convincing here. See also note 38.

32. Quinton, "Absolute Idealism," 124–50.

33. I read Hume, rightly or wrongly, much in the way P. F. Strawson does. See P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism* (London: Methuen, 1985), 10–29.

34. Paul Edwards, "Why" in Paul Edwards, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 296–302, argues that this is like asking for the color of heat. See also my *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 146–83, 448–91.

35. Blanshard, "The Philosophic Enterprise," 163.

36. If the metaphysician goes fallibilist and gives up her claim to certainty, she loses her advantage over scientists. Scientific knowledge surely appears reliable enough but will not yield certainty. We, on the quest for certainty, go to philosophy, taking it to be foundational to science, in the hope that it will yield certainty where science does not. A mitigated version of this with a chastened hope is that philosophy will yield something closer to certainty than science yields. If philosophy gives up either of these proud claims, it loses its basis for a claim to be foundational for science, for, as fallibilistic knowledge, science lays claim, on good Peircean grounds, to more adequately fixing belief than any alternative. And this claim seems at least to be very well established. It is only when we go philosophical and say that reason will not rest content with less than certainty that we find the scientific way of fixing belief inadequate. But here we are asking for something we cannot get.

37. On explanation being a pragmatic notion, see John Hospers, "What is Explanation?" in Antony Flew, ed., *Essays in Conceptual Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 94–119.

38. The reference to critical theorists here should make it plain that I am not advocating, as one reader mistakenly thought, a piecemeal approach to philosophy. My approach is through and through holistic.

39. It is not very clear that we know what this grand phrase "establish by reason" means.

40. Quinton narrates the role of this claim, and the importance of it for Absolute Idealists, very persuasively. See his "Absolute Idealism," 124–50.

41. Blanshard, "The Philosophic Enterprise," 169.

42. Thomas Baldwin, "Moore's Rejection of Idealism" in Richard Rorty et al., eds., *Philosophy in History, Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 357–74.

43. Bertrand Russell, "Critical Notice of H. Joachim's *The Nature of Truth*," *Mind* 15 (1906): 528–33.

44. G. E. Moore, "Mr. Joachim's *Nature of Truth*," *Mind* 16 (1907): 224–35. For Joachim's reply, see H. Joachim, "A Reply to Mr. Moore," *Mind* 16 (1907): 410–15.

45. Thomas Baldwin, "Moore's Rejection of Idealism," 368.