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The Retreat to Commitment
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PANCRITICAL RATIONALISM

1. *The Pattern of Failure*

The failure of critical rationalism, like that of panrationalism, was foreordained by the structure of the questions it emphasized and the criticism it permitted.¹ Any theory of rationality that is to succeed where these have failed in resolving the dilemma of ultimate commitment must bring this hidden structure to light, break it, and put forward an alternative. I shall attempt to do this in this chapter. My argument revolves around two historical observations, the first of which is the following.

The Western philosophical tradition is authoritarian in structure, even in its most liberal forms. This structure has been concealed by oversimplified traditional presentations of the rise of modern philosophy as part of a *rebellion against authority*. In fact, modern philosophy is the story of the rebellion of one authority against another authority, and the clash between competing authorities. Far from repudiating the appeal to authority as such, modern philosophy has entertained only one alternative to the practice of basing opinions on traditional and perhaps *irrational* authority: namely, that of basing them on a rational *authority*.

This no doubt at first served an urgent need. Those challenging ecclesiastical and political authorities needed to be able to show that disputes could nevertheless be settled in an orderly way: that traditional political, religious, and intellectual authorities could be displaced without producing social anarchy and intellectual chaos since they would be replaced by the authority of reason. Thus arose the various schools of modern philosophy whose careers we have sketched in reviewing panrationalism. These hoped to adjudicate among competing positions by providing rational authorities to substitute for unwanted forms of traditional authority. The structure embodied in these schools has been meticulously maintained. Each successive philosophical revolution, each being a phase in the search for an adequate theory of rationality, disclosed that the previous candidate for rational authority was unsatisfactory and proposed a new, supposedly more satisfactory, rational authority. The church was to be replaced by intellectual intuition; intellectual intuition by sense experience; sense experience by a certain language system, and so on. The story is always the same: past

¹Both panrationalism and critical rationalism arise within the polluted metacontext of justificationist philosophy of true belief. (See appendix 1.)

philosophical error is to be given a positive explanation by attributing it to the acceptance of a false rational authority.

This may be seen by examining the main questions asked in all these philosophies. Questions like: How do you know? How do you justify your beliefs? With what do you guarantee your opinions? *all beg authoritarian answers*—whether those answers be: the Bible, the leader, the social class, the nation, the fortuneteller, the Word of God, the intellect, or sense experience. One of the main tasks within Western philosophies has long been to extricate these supposedly infallible epistemological authorities from difficulties. For not only did they all prove fallible and questionable in themselves; even if they were assumed, *per impossibile*, to be indubitable, they still turned out to be inadequate justifications or guarantees for all the positions that the rationalist wished to hold—including the rationalist position itself.

This historical observation about the structure of Western philosophy I owe to an address by Karl Popper before the British Academy in 1960.² His simple observation—the sort of simple observation it requires genius to make—has an almost revelatory character that throws a very different light on the history and problems of philosophy. I shall try to build on this observation, first by putting it in some philosophical context, then by explaining it, and finally by suggesting the principal outlines of my own account of rationality—pancritical rationalism—which can be erected within the new, roomier, structure which the observation makes possible.

Since the entire argument which follows—which calls for a fundamental change in traditional ways of thinking about these matters—depends on this observation, I wish to make as clear as possible what is meant by it. Perhaps what is involved can be illustrated initially in terms of the related but far more concrete case of political philosophy.

Among the most important questions of traditional political philosophy are: Who should rule? What is the supreme political authority? Both questions beg authoritarian answers, such as: the people, the proletariat, the king, or the dictator. This authoritarian character of traditional political philosophy—although also generally unrecognized—is one of the most important causes today of the so-called theoretical breakdown of traditional political theory. The liberal democratic attempt to locate political authority in the people was largely motivated by the desire to replace the irrational, arbitrary, and often absentee rule of traditional monarchs by a rational authority. Political authority, it was argued, should, rationally speaking, stem from the people because, among other reasons, they would know their

²“On the Sources of Knowledge and of Ignorance”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1960; published separately in 1961 by Oxford University Press (Henriette Hertz Trust monographs); also published as the introduction to *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963). A preliminary statement of the view appeared in his “On the Sources of Our Knowledge”, *Indian Journal of Philosophy*, August 1959.

own needs best. However, as Walter Lippmann and others have argued, illustrating their cases with historical examples, a populace can also become an arbitrary and irrational political authority. And political affairs might in certain situations become so complex that the average man would not in fact be able to judge his own best interests. A ballot-box majority in such a situation might be as irrational an authority as the most arbitrary king. So democratic liberalism, by tying itself to *traditional* forms of democracy, is in danger of embracing *irrationalism* despite its intentions.

The practical problems involved in such situations are far from easy to solve. Nevertheless, the *theoretical* difficulties that have troubled Lippmann and others so much may be escaped with remarkable ease by recognizing the authoritarian character of the traditional questions and simply *changing the political question* from: Who should rule? to: How can we best arrange our political institutions so as to get rid of bad rulers when they appear, or at least restrict the amount of harm they can do?³

This seemingly minor change in the political question is enough to topple the authoritarian structure of political philosophy. The recognition that there is *no best kind of supreme political authority for all situations*, but that *any* authority—people, king, or dictator—may turn into a bad ruler, is implicit in the question. The change is important not only because absolute power corrupts absolutely. The ruler may simply become tired and old and lose touch with the realities that should govern the discharge of his responsibilities. Or he may, with the best of motives, become attached to an idea or ideology that thwarts his own intentions while also defeating the best interests of those he is charged with governing.

Even with this change in the traditional political question, practical political answers will not be easy to achieve. Imagination and dedication are required if men are to devise governmental institutions containing built-in mechanisms of self-criticism which will work efficiently in concrete geopolitical and economic contexts. But formulating the problem in this way reopens the door to a *rational* approach and enables one to be a political rationalist and a kind of democrat without committing one to the belief that any majority is right. And it helps explain why apparently undemocratic institutions might perhaps be unavoidable, at least at first, in some situations. If the ballot box itself is not an effective mechanism for eliminating bad leadership, even the ballot box may have to be subjected to institutional checks—which are themselves, in turn, open to check.

In his memoirs, Charles de Gaulle has described the traditional concept of sovereignty or authority as well as anyone: “a last resort designated in advance.” It is hardly necessary to add that he was referring to himself. What is challenged by the proposed change of question is the whole idea that political institutions of the last resort need to be designated in advance.

³Popper, *The Open Society*, chap. 7.

For conditions may change, and a good last resort in one situation may be disastrous in another. The ballot box, the national assembly, or the general who lives in the country, each may prove a good locus for political authority, and each may conceivably become tyrannical or ineffectual. The problem, then, should not be how to designate in advance an infallible source of political authority, but how to take out *insurance* against the wreck of whatever flagship happens at a particular time to be handling the navigation for the fleet of state. A country that happens to possess a brilliant and humane, if rusticated, general, who is willing and able to assume leadership when needed, has a potentially valuable piece of insurance as well as a potentially dangerous explosive. But a state whose institutions are so broken down that she must rely on such chance occurrence is poorly insured indeed. Perhaps both considerations apply to the Fourth Republic; it was "the fortune of France", as de Gaulle might put it, that the one *happened*, at one point in her history, to balance the other.

What holds true for political philosophy applies perhaps even more significantly to philosophy in general. All proposed intellectual authorities have turned out to be both intrinsically fallible and epistemologically insufficient. Infallible sources of knowledge and intellectual authority appear to be as unavailable as infallible political authorities. Yet those who readily admit the unreliability of political leaders often retain their hope for and trust in manifestly unworkable intellectual authorities. Perhaps the two are connected, so that political instability encourages uncritical escapist faith in intellectual systems within which chaos can more easily be concealed.

2. A Nonjustificational Approach

The authoritarian structuring of philosophy's fundamental epistemological questions can be remedied by making a shift comparable to the one suggested for political philosophy. We may not only reject (as did the critical rationalists) the demand for rational proofs of our rational standards. We may go further, and *also* abandon the demand that everything else *except* the standards be proved or justified by appealing to the authority of the standards, or by some other means. *Nothing gets justified*. Instead of following the critical rationalists in replacing philosophical *justification* by philosophical *description*, we may urge the philosophical *criticism* of standards as the main task of the philosopher. *Nothing gets justified; everything gets criticized*. Instead of positing infallible intellectual authorities to justify and guarantee positions, one may build a philosophical

program for counteracting intellectual error. One may create an ecological niche for rationality.

The philosophical questions that would have to be asked within such a program would show a striking structural change. The traditional demand for justification—the "How do you know?" question—would not legitimately arise. And if it arose in fact, the philosopher would have to reply: "I do not know; I have no guarantees."

If he wanted to be a little clearer, he might elaborate: "Some of the beliefs I hold may in fact be true; but since there are no guarantees or criteria of truth, no ways of definitely deciding, I can never know for sure whether what I believe to be true is in fact so." For such a philosopher, a different question would become important: *How can our intellectual life and institutions be arranged so as to expose our beliefs, conjectures, policies, positions, sources of ideas, traditions, and the like—whether or not they are justifiable—to maximum criticism, in order to counteract and eliminate as much intellectual error as possible?* In effect, we shall attempt to learn from our mistakes, to adapt to the unforeseen and unanticipated. Even though we may never reach definitive, authoritative, justified answers any more than we achieve total adaptation, we may learn to pose more and more probing questions. This concern could hardly clash more sharply with that of the traditional rationalist for whom the main intellectual offense was to hold an unjustifiable belief.

The shift from authoritative justification to criticism is a genuine innovation in philosophy whose importance cannot be overemphasized. Nonetheless, it might be objected immediately that there is no real shift or clash here; that the idea of criticizing competing views rationally, far from being novel, has been the main theme of modern philosophy from its outset—as I myself have stressed in the previous chapter. In this case, my so-called shift from justification to criticism would seem to be just another refrain of the song, "You must be critical", which has been in the philosophical litany from the pre-Socratics to Socrates himself, through Descartes and Kant, to Nietzsche, to the latest enthusiastic student of philosophy. Almost everybody is in favor of the critical attitude these days; it has become a rather old story. And one grows bored of paeans to criticism, however eloquent and right-minded, which never grapple with a belief that is so widespread it is taken quite uncritically for granted: that there is a fundamental theoretical limit to the role of criticism and, *ipso facto*, of rationality—as illustrated by the dilemma of ultimate commitment.⁴

So, until the dilemma of ultimate commitment is resolved, this hypotheti-

⁴In writing this paragraph I was thinking in part of Walter Kaufmann's *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1958). A brilliant and exciting book, it neglects to deal significantly with the *tu quoque* argument, and to that extent fails to treat the main defense of much contemporary religious and philosophical thought.

cal objection might continue, stress on the importance of criticism does no good; for this dilemma makes it futile for one philosopher to accuse another of being uncritical. The defendant usually can, and often does, reply that his is the point at which the limit to criticism should be drawn and that his accuser is himself uncritical in forgetting that he, too, limits its role.⁵

Although this objection is invalid, it should be taken very seriously. For in terms of the new theory of criticism to be outlined here, the notion of criticism, far from being trite, becomes one of the most unexplored, puzzling, and rewarding areas of philosophy. To show why such reactions are mistaken, I wish to bring out as clearly as possible the crucial difference between the new idea of criticism which is being advocated here and the old familiar themes of traditional critical philosophy.

This can be done in a straightforward way by asking for an explanation of our historical observation: Why has an authoritarian structure been retained—and even gone unnoticed—in modern philosophies that have been intentionally anti-authoritarian and critical in spirit? Has it perhaps been retained because it is inescapable?

These questions can be answered by a further historical observation. Namely, the task of solving the problems of rational critical arbitration among competing positions has been frustrated from the start by the fact that *in almost all traditional and modern philosophies—those that called themselves critical as well as those that did not—the idea of criticism has been fused with the idea of justification*. Since demands for justification are satisfied by the appeal to authority, the dilemma of ultimate commitment arises *in regard to criticism* within such philosophies; and authoritarianism remains inescapable. (The fusion of justification and criticism in Ayer's thought, for instance, explains why he turned to *description* when justification broke down. For criticism only appears as an *alternative* to justification after the two notions are separated.) As a group, the philosophies in which this fusion of justification and criticism occurs may be called *justificational philosophies of criticism*.

The purpose of the view proposed here is to escape this dilemma—and perhaps help make future hymns to the critical attitude worthwhile—by explicitly eliminating the notion of justification from the notion of criticism,

⁵Such an objection is entirely understandable. Western justificationist philosophy of true belief (see appendix 1) *does* contain many *theories* of criticism; it pays lip service to progress; it avows the critical attitude. Yet within the polluted metacontext of justificationism, criticism can function only within the limitations set down by commitments and attachments. Western justificationist philosophy does not ecologize: it does not provide a metacontext in which avowals of criticism can be effectively pursued. An embryonic fallibilist critical metacontext may, for instance, be interpreted by—and contained and stunted within—a more developed justificationist metacontext. Hitherto, fallibilism has been largely confined to the level of well-intentioned World 2 (in Popper's terminology) resolves, and has been contextualized within a justificationist World 3 institutional framework. Thus its limited success. The progress of criticism, and even the success of Western science, have hitherto occurred *in spite of* the context in which they have been couched. (For an account of Worlds 1, 2, and 3, see Popper's *Objective Knowledge* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972].)

and by aiming not simply to encourage criticism and objection but to do so within the framework of a *nonjustificational philosophy of criticism*. In this lies the difference between the view advocated here and many other critical philosophies.⁶

But what does it mean to talk of the fusion of justification and criticism? They have been fused in a number of different ways. One way, which is historically probably the most important, is dominant in most kinds of panrationalism. On this view, the way to criticize a view is to see whether it can be logically derived from—i.e., “justified by”—the rational criterion or authority. On an empiricist view, such as Hume's, for instance, the strongest criticism of any particular theory was that it could not be justified or established properly—in his case by an appeal to sense experience. If one examines Hume's philosophical writings, one finds him making fairly consistent use of the following basic strategy of criticism: He takes one idea after another—the idea of God, of the soul, of memory, of other minds—and asks whether it can be justified by being derived from sense experience, which he regards as man's only source of knowledge, or rational authority. If it can be justified as required, he accepts it; and if it cannot, he either rejects it or implies that at least from a rational point of view it *should* be rejected. As he writes: “When we entertain . . . any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is all too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.”⁷

Descartes's method “for conducting the reason well and for searching for truth in the sciences”, however different in other respects, is closely parallel to Hume's in this. Descartes's program of reductive analysis is a form of justificational criticism, and his program of synthesis is a particular form of justification. Ideas that cannot be reduced to clear and distinct ideas, and thus rationally justified, Descartes thinks should be rejected—just as everything that is to be accepted must be so justified. For both philosophers, the rational way to criticize an idea is to see whether or not it can be rationally justified.

Another strategy of criticism which is quite popular, although both weaker in its demands and more difficult to apply than the first, also fuses justification and criticism. It is weaker than the first strategy because it employs a kind of “elastic clause” similar to that in the United States

⁶See, for example, Henry David Aiken, *The Age of Ideology*. Aiken's failure to distinguish explicitly the problems of justification and criticism puts much of his discussion out of focus and results in the following expression which, however well-intentioned, is less than coherent. He writes (pp. 241–42): “. . . a tradition to end all traditions, which is committed, at bottom, only to the principle of reasonableness itself, the principle, that is, that a reason may be properly requested for any proposition whatever, and that no principle is ever exempted from critique, so long, at any rate, as the latter is conducted honestly and in good faith.”

⁷*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sec. 2.

Constitution. What matters is not whether a belief can be derived from the rational authority but whether it *conflicts* with it. In other words, it is not irrational to hold a belief that cannot be derived from—i.e., justified by—the rational authority unless its denial *can* be derived from the rational authority.

This strategy has been adopted not only in various intellectualist, empiricist, and pragmatist epistemologies, but also in many religious theories of authority. For instance, few theories that grant the Bible preeminence as an authoritative source of truth require that the faithful repudiate any belief that lacks biblical sanction. Beliefs not specifically endorsed or implied by the Bible—such as Newtonian theory—may be held for other reasons provided they do not conflict with views that do enjoy biblical justification. The Roman Catholic church has adopted one variant of this strategy: the authoritative preeminence of the pope applies only to matters of faith and morals.

This second strategy can be varied in many subtle ways. Indeed, a typology of theories of authority, developed in terms of the different possible moves consistent with the general strategy, would illuminate some of the particular twists taken now and then in historical controversies. Yet, all varieties I know continue to fuse justification and criticism in one way or another: to criticize a position, one must show either that it cannot be derived from, or else that it conflicts with, the rational authority, which is itself not open to criticism.

(A semantic account of justification completely in line with the position just outlined, and fusing justification and criticism, has now been reported in *The Journal of Symbolic Logic* as capturing the “intuitive concept of justification”! Thus a sentence is justified on this account if it follows deductively from justified sentences. A sentence not justified at one time may become justified later, but once justified it remains justified. The author notices how justification values assigned at present constrain future assignments. Of those sentences which are not justified at one time, some are consistent with the justified sentences and are thus weakly unjustified, whereas other sentences are inconsistent with the justified sentences and are thus strongly unjustifiable.)⁸

When combined, the two historical observations introduced in this chapter—Popper’s observation that traditional philosophy is authoritarian or justificational in structure, and my observation that these philosophies have fused the ideas of justification and of criticism—suggest the conditions under which the dilemma of ultimate commitment might be resolved. In fact, three precise questions may now be posed which, if pursued in turn, lead directly to a resolution of the dilemma:

⁸John T. Kearns, “A Semantics Based on Justification rather than Truth” (Abstract), *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, vol. 43, no. 3 (September 1978), p. 614.

(1) Is it possible, *within* a justificational or authoritarian theory of knowledge, to resolve the dilemma of ultimate commitment? If not, the justificational character of traditional philosophies might explain why all traditional attempts to resolve it have failed.

(2) Is an alternative nonjustificational, or nonauthoritarian, approach to philosophy possible?

(3) Within a nonjustificational approach, is it possible to resolve the dilemma of ultimate commitment? If so, how might this be done?

Definite answers to these questions, even negative ones, would be of considerable value. For example, negative answers to the first two questions would show rationalists that the dilemma could not be escaped at all, and would excuse them for lapsing without further effort or complaint into some candid, if limited, form of rationalism like that of Ayer. On the other hand, positive answers to questions 2 and 3 could lead to a resolution of what I believe is the main intellectual dilemma both of theoretical philosophy and of practical moral reflection.

Previous efforts to resolve the dilemma—many of them made by men like Bertrand Russell who passionately wanted to escape intellectual and moral relativism—have not taken into account the justificational framework in which philosophy is caught. Consequently, the possibility of an alternative has not been raised and the attempts have failed.

The answer to the first question must be negative. The dilemma of ultimate commitment cannot be escaped within an authoritarian theory of knowledge. This should be abundantly clear already from the difficulties encountered by panrationalism and critical rationalism. Indeed, the only fundamental way in which the present question differs from those encountered above is in its limitation in scope to justificational philosophies—an irrelevant limitation if previous philosophies have really all been justificational. Whether that limitation can ever become relevant, or can be escaped, is the problem involved in the second question.

The answer to the second question is affirmative. An alternative non-justificational philosophy is in fact possible.

I shall try to bring out the character of such an approach in the next two sections.

3. *Pancritical Rationalism—the Tu Quoque Reconsidered*

Implicit in such a nonjustificational approach are a new philosophical program and a new conception of rationalist identity. The new framework permits a rationalist to be characterized as one who is willing to entertain any position and holds *all* his positions, including his most fundamental standards, goals, and decisions, and his basic philosophical position itself, open to criticism; one who protects nothing from criticism by justifying it irrationally; one who never cuts off an argument by resorting to faith or irrational commitment to justify some belief that has been under severe critical fire; one who is committed, attached, addicted, to no position. I shall call this conception *pancritical rationalism*.

The new conception of rationalist identity shares its comprehensive aims, but not its justificationism, with the first type of rationalism. It also follows from, or is implied by, the traditional requirement. That is, a panrationalist who succeeds in justifying *all* his positions rationally clearly need not justify any of them irrationally. Nonetheless, the two requirements are not equivalent; if they were, the traditional requirement would also be implied by the new one—and that would mean that any refutation of the traditional requirement would destroy the new conception too. But in fact the new requirement does not imply the traditional one. It does not follow that a man who justifies none of his beliefs irrationally will justify them all rationally.

The last point indicates how much the new conception differs from both its predecessors. It differs from comprehensive or panrationalism in having altogether abandoned the ideal of comprehensive *rational* justification. And it also differs from critical rationalism, wherein a rationalist accepted that his position was rationally unjustifiable but went on to justify it irrationally by his personal and social moral commitment to standards and practices that were not themselves open to assessment or criticism since—as in Ayer's theory—criticism and rational justification are fused. Within a justificational approach, such a move might seem unavoidable. We cannot go on justifying our beliefs forever since the question of the correctness of the conclusion shifts back to the question of the correctness of the premises; and if the premises are never established or justified, neither is the conclusion. Since we want to justify and cannot do so *rationally*, irrational justification or commitment seems the only resort. So, if rationality lies in justification, it is severely limited by the necessity for commitment. But if rationality lies in criticism, and if we can subject everything to criticism and continued test, including the rationalist way of life itself,⁹ without leading to infinite regress,

⁹Also including (see appendix 1) *the fallibilist metacontext*.

circularity, the need to justify, or other such difficulty, then rationality is in this sense unlimited. The pancritical rationalist does not justify at all. If all justification—rational as well as irrational—is really abandoned, there is indeed no need to justify irrationally a position that is rationally unjustifiable. The position may be held rationally without needing justification at all—*provided that it can be and is held open to criticism and survives severe examination*. The question of how well a position is justified differs utterly from the question of how criticizable it is, and how well it is criticized.

The proviso just italicized masks a potential objection. So the hypothetical critic with whose arguments we grappled in the previous section might be revived long enough to make one further sally. "Suppose", he might grant, "that you are probably right in thinking that it is *generally* possible to separate the notions of justification and criticism. But can this separation be extended to the examination of the rationalist position itself? The logical impossibility of the program of comprehensive justification could be shown quite independently of the question whether any particular 'rational standards' were justifiable. Why should the story be different for comprehensive criticism? Would it not meet some of the same difficulties as the former? Indeed, is it really possible to eliminate justification entirely from criticism?"

These questions can perhaps be pinned down in the following formulation: Under traditional conceptions of rationalism the rationalist position itself was not rational. The rationalist identity excluded rationalist integrity. Under the new conception, can a comparable crisis be avoided? Is the new rationalist position itself rational? Does it satisfy its own requirements? Can the program of following an argument where it leads and of holding everything open to severe criticism itself be held open to criticism and survive it? Does not a paradoxical situation arise in regard to the criticism of the practice of argument just as it did in regard to the justification of that practice?

Surprising as it might seem, the practice of critical argument can be criticized without contradiction or any other logical difficulty. The general separation of justification and criticism can be extended to the examination of the rationalist position itself. Under previous conceptions of rationalism, the rationalist position, being unjustifiable, was itself not rational. But pancritical rationalism satisfies its own requirements: without any contradiction or other difficulty the very practice of critical argument can be criticized.¹⁰ Just as it is possible for a democracy, through democratic processes, to commit suicide (e.g., through a majority vote to abolish

¹⁰Anyone who continues to insist that rationalists just *cannot* hold their basic positions open to criticism and rejection, or *cannot* be willing to contemplate adopting some sort of irrationalism, ought to explain how this view can be reconciled with my own attempt to criticize my position as severely as possible. Again, how would he explain how it happened historically that many other similarly "prejudiced" rationalists nevertheless came to be driven by rational arguments like the *tu quoque* into irrationalism? He also has a more serious task: he must produce detailed argument to show that pancritical rationalists really must be irrationally committed. Then he might find out how sincere they are.

democracy in favor of dictatorship), so a pancritical rationalist who was not committed to the belief that his position was the correct one could be argued, or argue himself, out of his rationalism. Continued subjection to criticism of his allegiance to rationality is explicitly *part* of his rationalism.

For example, someone could devastatingly refute this kind of rationalism if he were to produce an argument showing that at least some of the unjustified and unjustifiable critical standards necessarily used by a pancritical rationalist were uncriticizable to boot, that here, too, *something* had to be accepted as uncriticizable in order to avoid circular argument and infinite regress.

Although I doubt it, such an argument may be possible. But the onus is on the critic to produce it. I have, in the meantime, done what I can. After arguing that the old difficulties in rationalist identity were due to the demand for justification, and that criticism might be had without justification, I have just now gone so far as to specify what sort of argument I would accept as a refutation of my position. Thereby, I may have helped my opponents to think of ways to attack it. I try to help them even more, in my remarks on the revisability of logic in the next section, by constructing an argument against my position that is as strong as I can make it. Although I am able to refute this particular argument, I may not be able to do the same with a similar argument in the future.¹¹

Until such an argument is produced, pancritical rationalism—the position or way of life which holds everything, justifiable or not, open to criticism—can be held as an approach that is *itself* open to criticism. And if rationality is located in criticizability rather than in justifiability, this position can be held rationally. This conclusion has an important, if by now obvious, consequence:

The answer to the third question is affirmative. Within the non-justificational, pancritical or comprehensively critical rationalism just outlined, the dilemma of ultimate commitment can be resolved and the *tu quoque* avoided. The case for arbitrary ultimate commitment rested entirely on the claim that rationality was so limited logically that such commitment was inescapable. As we have seen, there are no such logical limitations for rationality in the proposed nonjustificational critical approach.

Consequently, the *tu quoque* argument cannot be used at all against pancritical rationalism. Theologians have argued that not only to abandon allegiance to Christ, but even to subject that allegiance to criticism, is to forsake Christianity. But for a pancritical rationalist, continued subjection to criticism of his allegiance to rationality is explicitly *part* of his rationalism.

¹¹To refute pancritical rationalism, it would not be necessary to show that it is uncriticizable. If it could be shown that justification and criticism are generally, or even largely, inseparable in principle, that would be sufficient at least to damage pancritical rationalism badly. See appendix 4.

Because of these differences, the core of arbitrary relativism and of the defense of contemporary Protestant theology as well as of other forms of thought such as existentialism—the so-called rational excuse for irrational commitment—is defeated. If a pancritical rationalist accuses his opponent of protecting some belief from criticism through irrational commitment to it, he is not open to the charge that he is similarly committed. Criticism of commitments no longer boomerangs.

To avoid serious misunderstanding of this claim, and of the position proposed, several warnings should be sounded here. *First*, the claim that a rationalist need not commit himself even to argument is no claim that he will not or should not have strong convictions on which he is prepared to act. We can assume or be *convinced* of the truth of something without being *committed* to its truth.¹² As conceived here, a rationalist can, while eschewing intellectual commitments, retain both the courage of his convictions and the courage to go on attacking his convictions—the courage to think and to go on thinking. The word “courage” is appropriate here. The submission of one’s peripheral and unimportant beliefs to criticism requires no courage, but the willingness to subject to the risks of criticism the beliefs and attitudes one values most does require it.

Second, a pancritical rationalist, like other people, holds countless unexamined presuppositions and assumptions, many of which may be false. His rationality consists in his willingness to submit these to critical consideration when he discovers them or when they are pointed out to him. Charles Darwin’s example is a good one here. “I had”, he wrote, “during many years followed a golden rule, namely, that whenever a published fact, a new observation or thought came across me, which was opposed to my general results, to make a memorandum of it without fail and at once; for I had found by experience that such facts and thoughts were far more apt to escape from the memory than

¹²Since *The Retreat to Commitment* was first published, some writers on religion, accepting its argument, have maintained that Christian faith can be expressed in terms of *conviction*, as described here, rather than requiring *commitment*. See David R. Griffin, *A Process Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 154–55. For an attempt to bring Roman Catholic theology into a pancritical framework, see Reinhold Oswald Messner, “Über Möglichkeit und Wünschbarkeit eines Pankritischen Katholischen Dogmenglaubens”, in *Die Philosophie und die Wissenschaften: Simon Moser zum 65. Geburtstag* (Meisenheim: Verlag Anton Hain, 1967), pp. 206–27. See also the sketch of “falsifiable theism” in John King-Farlow and William Niels Christensen, *Faith and the Life of Reason* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1972), pp. 3 ff.

On the other hand, other writers have not noticed such possibilities. Thus William H. Austin, in “Religious Commitment and the Logical Status of Doctrines”, *Religious Studies*, vol. 9, pp. 39–48, states that the price of being a rationalist in my sense is too high since the rationalist “can preserve his rationalist integrity only by refraining from embarking upon any disciplined scientific inquiry. For every discipline has its assumptions, which give shape and direction to its inquiries, and to abandon them is simply to resign from the discipline”. This objection is beside the point, for I do not suggest that all assumptions be *abandoned*, only that they be held open to criticism! And I allow within this (see text above) that one might be convinced of such an assumption without being committed to it.

Nietzsche says: “A very popular error: having the courage of one’s convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one’s convictions!” Quoted in translation from Nietzsche’s *Musa-riusausgabe* by Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, p. vii.

favourable ones. Owing to this habit, very few objections were raised against my views which I had not at least noticed and attempted to answer".¹³

When one belief is subjected to criticism, many others, of course, have to be taken for granted—including those with which the criticism is being carried out. The latter are used as the basis of criticism not because they are themselves justified or beyond criticism, but because they are *unproblematical at present*.¹⁴ These are, *in that sense alone and during that time alone*, beyond criticism.

We stop criticizing—temporarily—not when we reach uncriticizable authorities, but when we reach positions against which we can find no criticisms. If criticisms of these are raised later, the critical process then continues. This is another way of saying that there is no theoretical limit to criticizability—and to rationality. One belief that is nearly always taken for granted when one or another belief is being criticized is the belief in criticism itself. But the fact that most of a man's beliefs are beyond criticism at any one time does not mean that any of them has to be beyond criticism all the time: this is not so logically, and probably not even practically. Nor does it mean that the belief in criticism itself may not come up for critical review from time to time. Such a willingness unattachedly to hold open to revision even those positions supposed most surely to be true is part of the spirit of pancritical rationalism.

Pancritical rationalism is therefore compatible with one kind of relativism. The survival of a position is relative to its success in weathering serious criticism. And a position that survives at one time may be refuted later. This kind of relativism—which is due to the fact that we are not gods, are ignorant, lack imagination, and are pervasively fallible—is quite harmless. It is an example of how learning proceeds by trial and error—by making conjectures and trying to criticize them. The making and destroying of theories is part of, and parallel to, the evolutionary process.

One will not begin to question statements that seem to be true simply in the face of arguments that it is, say, *logically* possible that they are not! In that sense, one calls a halt to criticism. One will, however, begin to question this "halting place" when a *particular* argument is produced to challenge it—when an argument is produced that renders it *problematical*. In regard to standard sceptical arguments, all positions are *equally* problematical—equally indefensible—and equally defective because equally unjustifiable. In order to compare positions intelligently we need a theory of criticism in

¹³Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*, p. 123. See my "What Was Wrong with Darwin?", *New York Review of Books*, September 15, 1977.

¹⁴Our objective structure of belief will be relative to the basic critical statements we accept ("basic statements" in scientific criticism). If we were to make these basic critical statements at which we stop absolute, then we would get subjectivity or relativism of the vicious kind. But this we have not done. See my discussion of this problem in regard to Fries's "trilemma" in appendix 3 to this book.

terms of which positions differ in problematality. This becomes possible once the aim of justification, which is responsible for equality of problematality, is abandoned.

Third, it should be remembered that our problem is a logical one, and that the point being made here is logical, too. The classical problem of rationality lay in the fact that, for logical reasons, the attempt to justify everything (or to criticize everything through justification) led to infinite regress or dogmatism. But nothing *in logic* prevents us from holding everything open to nonjustificational criticism. To do so does not, for instance, lead to infinite regress.

There may, of course, be other *nonlogical* considerations which lead one to grant that it would be pointless to hold some particular view as being open to criticism. It would, for instance, be a bit silly for me to maintain that I held some statements that I might make—e.g., "I am over two years old"—open to criticism and revision.

Yet the fact that some statements are in some sense like this "beyond criticism" is irrelevant to our problems of relativism, fideism, and scepticism. I may *in fact* hold some such views as beyond criticism; but I do not *have to do so* logically: *I do not have to be dogmatic* about any of these matters. In holding everything open to criticism I, of course, do not deny that there are true statements and valid arguments; nor do I maintain that for every proposition there must exist some sound argument against it! Holding such statements as beyond criticism in a practical sense has nothing to do with stemming an infinite regress. What is needed for the effort to state a consistent theory of rationality is to show that it is logically possible (without leading to infinite regress, vicious circle, or other logical difficulty) to hold such statements open to criticism. When this is done, no *tu quoque* can be mounted.¹⁵

Many issues of course remain. Of these, perhaps the most important are the technological problems of what means of criticism to adopt and how to organize these means, our critical intellectual institutions, so as to achieve maximum criticism. Before turning to these matters in the next section, one further possible objection needs to be noted. It has to do not with the substance of the viewpoint I have presented but with my general method of approaching the problem. The question is whether my theory of rationalist identity is not simply a *redefinition* of the word "rationalist"—of the suspect sort I have criticized in theology—designed to fit my desires and prejudices while avoiding philosophical difficulties.¹⁶

It is not: any attempt to resolve the dilemma of ultimate commitment this

¹⁵See A. A. Derksen, "The Failure of Comprehensively Critical Rationalism", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1980, and my reply, "On the Criticisability of Logic", in the same issue.

¹⁶Wolf-Dieter Just makes this accusation—without argument or explanation—in "Kritischer Rationalismus und Theologie", *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, vol. 15 (January 1971), pp. 1–19.

way could succeed only at the expense of cheapening the whole quest for an answer and of turning a serious problem into a trivial verbal question. But just how does my view differ from such cheap solutions?

When a problem like the dilemma of ultimate commitment arises and a theory is proposed to solve it, that theory may use terms taken from language and tradition which have many different connotations, some held unconsciously. And some of those connotations may prevent the theory from adequately solving the problem. In such a case, one may sometimes be lucky enough eventually to *eliminate* a troublesome connotation in such a way that the resulting theory, while perhaps still using the same word, *does* solve the *original* problem—not a weakened version of it. What has taken place, however, is not *simply* a redefinition of a word—let alone a surreptitious redefinition. The theory *itself* has been fundamentally changed by the elimination of an assumption that had been smuggled “inside” one of the terms it uses.

Similarly, in presenting pancritical rationalism, I proposed a theory of rationality that I think can satisfactorily solve the original problem in response to which self-conscious theories of rationalist identity arose within the rationalist tradition. To do this, I explicitly separated, I believe for the first time within a theory of rationality, the notions of justification and of criticism; and I rejected the false assumption, usually held unconsciously, that these two notions *must* be bound together.

It is not difficult to see how such a program differs from some diagnostic programs in philosophy which are primarily concerned with definition of words: the “linguistic analysis” of ordinary language, for example. My aim is to unburden the idea of rationality of excess and troublesome meanings; *not to explicate* its meaning and use as they occur in ordinary language but to *eliminate* from it an ordinary assumption about rationality which prevented the solution of the problem that accounts of rationality were intended to solve.

Two of the professors of philosophy at Cambridge University during the present century—G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein (the latter particularly in his later period)—exerted an enormous influence on contemporary philosophy with their contentions that our intractable philosophical problems often arise because special, extraordinary, *philosophical* interpretations are superimposed misleadingly on ordinary language. We then become confused about how to describe certain situations and as a result ask rather odd questions—whether, for example, we really *know* that other people have minds. Concepts are used out of their proper context and “language goes on holiday”, to use Wittgenstein’s apt phrase. We may eliminate such perplexity, it is claimed, by going back over the problem and tracing by example after example how certain puzzling terms such as “knowledge” are used. We have then done all we can: we have shown how the usage of the term arose; how, in detail, it is used in varying circumstances; and in what

respects the particular puzzling case before us differs from others. Thereby, we gradually “break the hold” words have on us and begin to stop stretching them.

This method doubtless has a place in philosophy. Philosophical dust-throwing caused by the misuse of language does occur—perhaps even among linguistic analysts. However, in so far as the idea of rationality is concerned, the story is very different. Here the notions of justification and criticism are simply mixed. This is traditional and sanctioned by ordinary language, which is a great repository of tradition. Only by proposing something new, an *extraordinary* demarcation between these two notions, can the problem be solved. Ordinary, intuitive, traditional, and—so far as I can ascertain—*original* usage led philosophers into the dilemma of ultimate commitment. Thus, I have not defined a term or engaged in linguistic analysis of meaning. If the activity I advocate must have a name, it might be “diacritical analysis”.¹⁷

My approach also differs from Tillich’s “word healing”. It is true that we both emphasize the importance of the process of elimination in conceptual analysis. That some men are no longer “at home” in the world but are estranged in it and from it, Tillich ascribes in part to their “looking at the world in the wrong way”—a state that might be cured by eliminating certain attitudes, assumptions, prejudices, and commitments which prevent their attaining to the ecstatic communion with reality whose possibility is revealed in the “New Being” of Jesus.

But whereas in Tillich’s system the elimination is akin to Restoration, mine is closer to Revolution. His conviction that Revelation happened in the biblical events forces him to “heal” words like “faith” by amputating only the accretion of philosophical and psychological views that have become attached to them over the years but are no longer acceptable. Such surgery is sadly insufficient: the conceptual operations demanded for the solution of philosophical problems sometimes must be directed to *vital* parts of the *original* view. That is, not all conceptual disease in philosophy is acquired; some is congenital; and in both cases some diseases are incurable. This means that philosophical theories are sometimes beyond restoration and must die.

And even if a cure is possible, new ideas and new medicine may be required in addition to surgery. There is not only disease and rebirth in philosophy; there is also conception, creation, and new birth.

¹⁷I owe this term to a conversation with Popper, who suggests that a number of philosophical achievements of the twentieth century which *prima facie* resemble definitions, and which perhaps have helped encourage the fad for analysis of meaning, are in fact “diacritical analyses” in the sense described here. Examples are Russell’s theory of descriptions and Tarski’s theory of truth.

Later Popper used the word “dialysis” to refer to such analyses. See his *Unended Quest*, sec. 7, and also his *Realism and the Aim of Science*, vol. 1 of the *Postscript to the Logic of Scientific Discovery*, part 1, Addendum, pp. 261–78.

4. Technological Considerations: What Counts as Criticism?

Under the approach to philosophy suggested here, many technical and technological questions become central to the theory of knowledge. But I do not intend to explore these in detail now—any more than I have tried to solve in this essay the institutional problems I believe should replace much of traditional political philosophy.

The question of what critical means to use to reduce error in philosophy is, however, related to a number of current disputes. So I shall make some brief programmatic remarks that may help indicate where further attention might profitably be directed. Popper has already focused attention on one of the means—the check of empirical experience—in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* and elsewhere. The problem of how to criticize, how to reduce error in those of our theories, such as the metaphysical ones, which are *not* subject to empirical check, has been discussed within a similar framework by Popper himself and by J.W.N. Watkins (political philosophy, ethics, and metaphysics), J.O. Wisdom (metaphysics and psychoanalysis), Joseph Agassi (nonempirical principles of interpretation in physics), and Imre Lakatos (mathematical conjecture).¹⁸

Since there is considerable disagreement about what sort of criticisms should apply against various theories, it might appear that we are on the verge of stepping right back into the dilemma of ultimate commitment. This does not happen, however; for when the abandonment of the old aim of *establishing* our views is taken seriously, it must be held that we cannot decisively refute theories either. For any theory will be refuted only relative to our acceptance of critical arguments that are incompatible with it. This means that we must be willing to reopen to examination and further criticism and possible rejection all the critical arguments and critical institutions we have accepted. *But within our new approach, this presents no difficulty.* Such a willingness to hold open to revision in principle even those notions that we believe most surely to be true is part of the spirit of pancritical rationalism.

All this is important with reference to theologians who claim to be in irreconcilable opposition to the presuppositions of modern rationalism. *Although theologians and rationalists appear to be in very sharp disagree-*

¹⁸See the articles by Watkins cited above. See also Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, esp. chap. 15; his *Realism and the Aim of Science*, esp. part 1, chaps. 1–3; and his *Quantum Theory and the Schism in Physics*, esp. chap. 4. See also Joseph Agassi, "Sensationalism," *Mind*, 1964; and "The Nature of Scientific Problems and Their Roots in Metaphysics", in Mario Bunge, ed., *The Critical Approach*; Imre Lakatos, "Infinite Regress and Foundations of Mathematics", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume, 1962, and *Proofs and Refutations*; J. O. Wisdom, "The Refutability of 'Irrefutable' Laws", *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, February 1963.

ment about their high-level metaphysical theories, they are in considerably closer agreement with respect to the kinds of considerations they in principle, if not always in practice, accept as proper critical institutions. Moreover, although logic is the critical institution about which theologians differ most sharply from rationalists, I shall try to show that most theologians presuppose logic in practice *even where they deny it in principle.*

We have at least four means of eliminating error by criticizing our conjectures and speculations. These checks are listed in descending order according to their importance and the rigor with which they may be applied.

- (1) The check of *logic*: Is the theory in question consistent?
- (2) The check of *sense observation*: Is the theory *empirically* refutable by some sense observation? And if it is, do we know of any refutation of it?
- (3) The check of *scientific theory*: Is the theory, whether or not it is in conflict with sense observation, in conflict with any scientific hypotheses?
- (4) The check of the *problem*: What problem is the theory intended to solve? Does it do so successfully?

Almost all prominent Protestant theologians today accept the second consideration: they have by now abandoned those traditional theological theories that are actually contradicted by sense observation.

A smaller, yet still large, majority of theologians accept the third consideration: they are willing to abandon any theories that conflict with well-tested scientific hypotheses. The ambivalent attitude that occasionally appears here stems from the widespread acceptance of an instrumentalist view of science, and the possibility it opens for a theologian to hold a belief that contradicts a scientific *theory* without at the same time contradicting any statements about empirical observation. Moreover, since no scientific theory can ever be fully verified by experience—the best we can do is to *test* scientific hypotheses—a genuine possibility remains *forever* open, even on a realist view of scientific theories, that any particular hypothesis may be refuted by experience. Thus, when a theological statement conflicts with a scientific theory, the theological statement *could* in principle be correct.

About the fourth critical consideration—what I have called the check of the problem—there is considerable controversy among Protestant theologians, although I expect that at least a bare majority accept it, too. Those who side with Barth, however, while not denying that their Revelation helps solve human problems, claim that the Word of God, being a Revelation of God, *need not* do so: it is *thrown* at man, like a stone, not fitted on him like a suit of clothes. Those influenced more by Niebuhr and Tillich take a contrary view, arguing that the Revelation is revelatory in respect to certain permanent human problems.

I agree with the followers of Tillich in believing that ideas must be evaluated in terms of their capacity to solve problems. This is true not only

of theological ideas but even of scientific theories: these, too, can be judged only by reference to a definite problem situation. Whether or not a theory is scientific, and whether or not it can be justified in some particular way, we have to ask questions of it, such as: Does it solve the problems it was intended to solve? Or does it merely shift the problem? Does it solve the problem better than competing views? Or does it create still worse difficulties? Does it contradict other philosophical theories needed for solving other problems? Is it fruitful in suggesting new problems?

At the same time I think that the followers of Barth are perfectly right in claiming that *if* one takes the original absolute *commitment* seriously, then it is at least theoretically irrelevant whether the Revelation to which one is committed solves any human problems. It is precisely because I cannot make Barth's or any other ultimate commitment that I think the problem-solving consideration important—partly as a means of bringing erroneous commitments under critical fire.

The idea of the "check of the problem" is of perhaps even greater importance for philosophy generally. Although Max Weber, Collingwood, Popper, and some other philosophers have emphasized the importance of criticizing philosophical theories by comparing them historically against the problems they were intended to solve, the idea of the critical effectiveness of this check is sometimes dismissed as a vague popular notion. Now, the idea of the problem is indeed a bit vague and popular. But it is popular to call it vague; and the unadorned charge that something is vague is, by itself, a vague criticism. I hope to have illustrated in my own argument above the usefulness of the critical comparison of philosophical theories against problems, and thereby to have made the notion clearer. For I argued that panrationalism, in failing to solve its problem, led to a crisis of integrity; that critical rationalism attained integrity at the expense of ignoring the problem; and that pancritical rationalism can solve the original problem with integrity.

One reason why the notion of the problem has seemed so vague is that most contemporary philosophies tend to devalue the importance of the history of philosophy. To tell which philosophical view best solves important philosophical problems it is necessary to go to the historical texts and examine concretely what those problems were and how they have developed and changed. Consequently, the historical study of philosophical problems is of crucial importance for even the most theoretical and analytical of philosophers.

By far the most controversial critical consideration, however, is the first: logic.¹⁹ Although most theologians will compliment logic "in its proper

¹⁹My discussion of logic here has been much misunderstood. For a more elaborate presentation and defense of my views, see the appendices to this book, esp. appendix 5.

place", many of them seem willing, in a jam, to reject it. Usually they are far more ready to reject logic than to deny empirical experience or even a scientific hypothesis.²⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, has indicated his willingness to defy logic over substantially the same issue that led William James to pragmatism and a kind of irrationalism: the problem of free will and moral responsibility. Niebuhr writes:

The doctrine of original sin remains absurd from the standpoint of a pure rationalism, for it expresses a relation between fate and freedom which cannot be fully rationalized . . . unless the paradox be accepted as a rational understanding of the limits of rationality and as an expression of faith that a rationally irresolvable contradiction may point to a truth which logic cannot contain. . . .²¹

Niebuhr assumes that "from the standpoint of a pure rationalism" determinism is an inescapable theory and believes that it conflicts with the idea of free will and human responsibility.²² But he is committed by his religious views to the idea that human beings are responsible and free. Since he feels he can abandon neither free will nor determinism (although he believes the two are logically inconsistent), he relinquishes logic. His alternative course is to embrace a kind of Hegelian logic, probably the most discredited logical theory in the history of the subject.

Similar views about the dispensability of logic—indeed, that the main difficulty in many of our most important intellectual and spiritual conflicts probably lies in our submission to its oppressive authority—rebound today throughout our literature of cultural diagnosis. "If a true prophet should appear", Norman Podhoretz has predicted, "his revelation would be acceptable to reason because it would illuminate life so powerfully as to compel rational assent; it would, in other words, provide a new way of understanding the world, new categories, even a new logic".²³ J. D. Salinger echoed this mood in his striking short story *Teddy*. Teddy, a precocious ten-year-old and a kind of prophet, is talking, on board ship in the mid-Atlantic, with Nicholson, an Ivy League intellectual who teaches education:

²⁰See Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM Press, 1949), p. 15, and *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 8: "The very minimum postulate of freedom from contradiction is acceptable by theology only upon the very limited interpretation, by the scientific theorist upon the scarcely tolerable one, that theology will not assert an irremovability in principle of the 'contradictions' which it is bound to make good." Other theologians who seem to prefer to retain logic nonetheless treat such things as the law of noncontradiction as categories that are in principle revisable. See Hodgson, *For Faith and Freedom*, vol. 1, p. 50.

²¹Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), vol. 1, p. 278.

²²It is no longer at all clear that there need be any contradiction here. Popper's arguments have convinced me that determinism is a scientifically untenable view. See his *The Open Universe* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), being vol. 2 of *Postscript to the Logic of Scientific Discovery*; his "Indeterminism in Quantum Physics and in Classical Physics, Parts I and II", *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 1950; and "On the Status of Science and Metaphysics". For an excellent explanation of why Hegelian dialectic seems so attractive to many intellectuals, see his "What Is Dialectic?" in *Conjectures and Refutations*, chap. 15.

²³*Commentary*, March 1960, p. 276.

"You're just being logical," Teddy said to him impassively.

"I'm just being what?" Nicholson asked, with a little excess of politeness.

"Logical. You're just giving me a regular, intelligent answer," Teddy said.

"I was trying to help you. You asked me how I get out of the finite dimensions when I feel like it. I certainly don't use logic when I do it. Logic's the first thing you have to get rid of."

Nicholson removed a flake of tobacco from his tongue with his fingers.

"You know Adam?" Teddy asked him. . . . "You know that apple Adam ate in the Garden of Eden, referred to in the Bible?" he asked. "You know what was in that apple? Logic. Logic and intellectual stuff. That was all that was in it. So—this is my point—what you have to do is vomit it up if you want to see things as they really are. I mean if you vomit it up, then you won't have any more trouble with blocks of wood and stuff. You won't see everything stopping off all the time. And you'll know what your arm really is, if you're interested. Do you know what I mean? Do you follow me?"

"I follow you," Nicholson said, rather shortly.

"The trouble is," Teddy said, "most people don't want to see things the way they are" . . . He reflected. "I never saw such a bunch of apple-eaters".²⁴

Prevalent as such ideas are, the attempt to reject logic at once raises a host of problems of which many theologians, apple-eating and otherwise, seem quite unaware. One serious difficulty is that "from a contradiction everything follows". If a contradiction is admitted into a set of views, it will follow from that set of views, for instance, that John F. Kennedy is identical with Nikita Khrushchev *and* that John F. Kennedy is not identical with Nikita Khrushchev. And any other statement, as well as *its* contrary, also follows. This sort of result inclines one to regard the logic repudiator as someone who really does not know what he is doing.

However, simply to dismiss this point of view is rash. For even the fact that "from a contradiction everything follows" is perhaps not so telling as it might seem. The logic repudiator might retort that everything follows from a contradiction only within our very inadequate logic, and that this will not happen in the "higher logic" of God or of the future "prophet". In any case, Niebuhr's claim that logic might be rejected in the face of certain considerations, in the course of rational argument, and during our search to learn more about the world and how to act in it, has to be taken seriously—if only because some contemporary logicians of the highest rank have said things that appear to support it. I have in mind the epistemological holism W. V. Quine espoused in his well-known article, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". This position is influential throughout American neo-pragmatist thinking, and has antecedents in some remarks John Dewey and C. I. Lewis had at different times made about logic. Morton White endorsed a position similar to Quine's in *Toward Reunion in Philosophy*.²⁵

²⁴J. D. Salinger, *Nine Stories*, 1953; or *For Esmé with Love and Squalor* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), pp. 207–8. See also Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 8.

²⁵W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), chap. 2; and Morton White, *Toward Reunion in Philosophy*.

Writing in a vein reminiscent of Aristotle's description of logic as a tool of the educated man, Quine asked that formal logic be pictured "as one phase of the activity of a hypothetical individual who is also physicist, mathematician, *et al*".²⁶ According to Quine, when a critical individual brings the body of his beliefs to the test of criticism, *any* part of that body may be revised and rejected in the light of unfavorable criticism. There is *no* segment of it—such as the set of "analytically true" statements, including logic—which is so insulated from such continuous criticism and revision that we could say in advance that "the mistake could not be here". Quine has vividly described his approach:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Reevaluation of some statements entails reevaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections—the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system, certain further elements of the field. . . . But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. . . . If this view is right . . . it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, *which hold come what may*. *Any statement can be held true come what may*, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. *Conversely, by the same token no statement is immune to revision*. Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics; and what difference is there in principle between such a shift and the shift whereby Kepler superseded Ptolemy, or Einstein Newton, or Darwin Aristotle?²⁷

Accepting Quine's framework, White adds that not only empirical experience but also "moral experiences" can occasion us to revise the totality of our beliefs—including logic. Moreover, he thinks that those beliefs which are revisable in the light of moral feelings cannot be demarcated from those beliefs which are not revisable in the light of moral

²⁶See Quine's article in *Mind*, October 1953. Compare with the passage quoted, and with other parts of his article, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094b23), *De partibus animalium* (639a5), (639b7), and *Metaphysics* (1005b1). These passages from Aristotle are particularly relevant since Quine's article was critically directed toward "ordinary language" critics of logic like Gilbert Ryle, P. F. Strawson, and S. E. Toulmin. Acknowledging that logical language has its roots in ordinary language, Quine, like Aristotle, argues that its categories and terms are not meant to impose a false model on ordinary discourse. For another discussion of some of the issues arising here, see Popper's comments on some of Ryle's views in "Why are the Calculuses of Logic and Arithmetic Applicable to Reality?", in *Conjectures and Refutations*.

²⁷"Two Dogmas". Italics are mine.

feelings. Thus the distinction between fact and value is rejected along with the distinction between analytic and synthetic.

Several things may be said about this extreme holism. In the first place, although it looks like the pancritical rationalism I have just championed, we shall see in a moment that there are important differences.

In the second place, there are a number of senses in which logic is no doubt open to revision and in which there are "alternative logics". To take only two examples: the traditional Aristotelian logic of categorical propositions has been abandoned or, at best, retained for a very limited use. It is too clumsy and restricted to enable us to formulate many of the rules of inference which are valid in our ordinary discourse, not to mention the inferences of physics and mathematics. In addition, various artificialities may have to be introduced into our logical systems in order to avoid the famous logical paradoxes of Russell, Grelling, and others.

In the third place, in order that the position Quine and White take not be seriously misunderstood, it is important to remember that both are rationalists who do not *personally* reject logic. Indeed, both seem to doubt that circumstances could ever require us to deny the logical laws. White, for example, in an explicit discussion of Niebuhr's views, has emphasized his own loyalty to logic.²⁸

Still, their approach seems to open the door, even if only nonlogicians will pass through, to a Niebuhrian sentiment about logic. Because of this, the next point is quite important. Our logical theories may, to be sure, be repaired and revised far more than we at present expect, and it is impossible to predict when such repairs will be necessary. Whether empirical observations or moral feelings could ever occasion such legitimate revision is quite another question, and I shall not tangle with it here. *Nonetheless*, however much the various alternative systems of logical rules of inference may differ among themselves, they have one important feature in common: whenever we observe these rules and, *starting with true premises*, argue in accordance with them, *we arrive at true conclusions*. The question arises whether we can revise logic in the sense of denying that true premises need always lead, in any valid inference, to true conclusions.

As Niebuhr's conception of "dialectic" shows, he apparently does regard logic as revisable in this way. And, although Quine and White seem nowhere explicitly to have faced this question when making their remarks about the revisability of logic, certain of their comments suggest that they also regard this revision as *in principle* possible. In the following paragraphs, where I speak of the revision of logic, I shall have *this* kind of revision in mind; I have no objection to the others.

The view that logic, in *this* sense, is part of our system of beliefs, which we

²⁸See the "Preface and Epilogue for 1957" in his *Social Thought in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

bring to the test during critical argument and which is revisable in the light of the results of such critical argument, is untenable. For there is an *absolute difference in principle* between the replacement of logic with another "logic" and the replacement of other views, such as (to refer back to the passage quoted from Quine's "Two Dogmas") Ptolemy's with Kepler's, or Newton's with Einstein's.

The reasons for these contentions are complicated, but the basic structure of my argument is this: the "argument situation" in terms of which Quine and White (and, I think, Niebuhr, too) envisage the revisability of logic *presupposes logic*. To put this another way: we cannot regard logic as part of the set of beliefs that are put to the test in critical discussion, for the notion of testing and revising in accordance with the results of the test presupposes logic. And this is so regardless of what other critical checks one does or does not allow.

This rather abstract point can be explained as follows. The idea of *testing* and *revising* in the light of tests, or—more simply—the idea of critical argument, presupposes the notion of *deducibility*, i.e., the idea of the *retransmission of falsity* from conclusions to premises and, *ipso facto*, of the *transmission of truth* from premises to conclusion. That is, when the conclusion of a valid argument is discovered to be false, that falsity is retransmitted to the premises whence it must have come: at least one of these premises must be reevaluated. If our totality of beliefs implies "x", and if, upon testing, we get the result "not x", then there is a mistake in our set of beliefs which *needs to be corrected*. However, this idea of deducibility is practically equivalent to the second minimum sense of logic previously discussed.²⁹

Hence, the idea that a set of beliefs might be brought "in closer correspondence with reality" by abandoning logic is mistaken, since the tool of logic is needed in order to argue and learn about reality—in order to bring the rest of our theories into closer correspondence with reality. Logic, then, cannot be part of the totality that is brought under test. In this consists the absolute difference in principle between the revision and correction of our nonlogical (as distinguished from illogical) beliefs, and what must amount to the rejection of logic.

An observant reader—particularly if he or she was struck by the apparent similarity between Quine's idea that everything is open to revision and my

²⁹Moreover, it has been argued that from the notion of deducibility alone, the validity of most of logic, including propositional logic and the lower functional logic, may be established, without presupposition of axioms or primitive rules of inference. See Popper, "New Foundations for Logic", *Mind*, 1947; "Logic Without Assumptions", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1947; "Functional Logic Without Axioms or Primitive Rules of Inference", *Proceedings Koninklijke Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen*, vol. 50, no. 9 (1947), p. 1214; "On the Theory of Deduction", parts 1 and 2, *ibid.*, vol. 51, no. 2 (1947), pp. 173 ff.; vol. 51, no. 3 (1947), pp. 322 ff.; "The Trivialization of Mathematical Logic", *Proceedings 10th International Congress of Philosophy*, 1948; and "Why Are the Calculuses of Logic and Arithmetic Applicable to Reality?" For a further discussion of the revisability of logic, see also appendix 5 below.

theory of pancritical rationalism—may, or perhaps *should*, have started to wonder whether in the last few paragraphs I have not tacitly been backing out of pancritical rationalism. It might seem as if I were now insisting that we are *committed* to logic.

But this is not so.

The point is that the practice of critical argument and logic are bound together. We can reject logic, but to do so is to reject the practice of argument. What we cannot do is to go on arguing critically after we have rejected the idea that true premises must, in a valid argument, lead to true conclusions. If we want to learn about, or even to describe, the world, we need to be able to derive true conclusions from true premises.

To be sure, to abandon logic is to abandon rationality as surely as to abandon Christ is to abandon Christianity. The two positions differ, however, in that the rationalist can, from his own rationalist point of view, consider and be moved by criticisms of logic and of rationalism, whereas the Christian cannot, from his own Christian point of view, consider and be moved by criticisms of his Christian commitment.³⁰

I have not shown, as Descartes tried to do, that universal doubt is absurd; nor have I shown that the rationalist must hold something (namely, logic) immune to criticism. I have argued: (1) that *everything*, including the practice of arguing and revising (and using logic), is open to criticism and rejection. But (2) *as long as* we do continue to revise and criticize—as long as we have not rejected this practice—we presuppose logic, for it is entailed by the idea of revision. If we reject the practice of argument and revision we may reject logic, but we cannot reject logic so long as we continue in this practice.

Thus I have stated an absolute presupposition of argument to which we are committed not *as human beings*, because of our biology, psychology, or sociology, but *as arguers about the world*. No human being need argue unrestrictedly about the world: therefore he need not, as a human being, be committed to logic; only as arguer about the world. In so far as the practice of critical argument is the core of the process of learning about the world, this presupposition is important. The point also has philosophical and theological implications. Most importantly in the philosophical realm, the absolute difference just stated makes it possible to demarcate between those beliefs that are revisable *within* the argument situation and those that are not. Thereby it draws a sharp line which, although not corresponding to the traditional “analytic-synthetic” dichotomy, does mark off one portion of the class of truths traditionally known as “analytic truths” and thus refutes claims made by Quine, White, and others, that *no* boundary between

³⁰See Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, chap. 2. “And faith is concerned with a decision *once for all*. . . . Everyone who has to contend with unbelief should be advised that he ought not to take his own unbelief too seriously. Only faith is to be taken seriously”.

analytic and synthetic truths may be drawn.

This makes it possible to introduce what might be called a “revisability criterion”; namely, that whatever is presupposed by the argument-revisability situation is not itself revisable *within that situation*.

Now, if we accept (1) Popper’s “falsifiability criterion” as marking off scientific from nonscientific beliefs, and (2) my “revisability criterion”, as just proposed, to demarcate those beliefs that are revisable within the argument situation from those that are not, then the spectrum of our claims can be sharply divided into at least three parts. To speak metaphorically, in a small area on the left would be logic and in a small area on the right would be empirical science.³¹ In between, in a much larger section, would be some claims which have traditionally been called analytic and others which have traditionally been called synthetic, but which we can say are *neither* empirically refutable (and hence scientific) nor presupposed by the activity of argument (that is, logic). This middle area would contain, at least, all of metaphysics, some of mathematics, and part of that curious class of statement such as “all brothers are male siblings” around which much of the analytic-synthetic controversy has revolved.

The theological ramifications of these remarks can be put more simply. Most contemporary theologians, following Barth, speak in terms of continuing conjecture about the Word of God and of revision of conjecture in the face of various kinds of experience. Hence, in their own basic activity they presuppose logic, even when in respect to certain specific theories they claim to abandon it. Moreover, many theologians like Tillich and Niebuhr (or Butterfield) who advance apologetic arguments against their opponents presuppose in so doing that their opponents presuppose logic, *unless* they regard these arguments as merely persuasive gimmicks. Thus, when the theologians claim to abandon logic, they are usually defying the presuppositions of their own programs, thwarting their own intentions.

These remarks about logic are pertinent to the more general argument. If theologians would add logic to those critical intellectual institutions such as empirical observational experience whose value they already accept; and if they also took seriously their own claims to be self-critical, they would soon find that most of their theories are indeed untenable—that is, they will not stand up under criticism—that they raise far more difficulties than they deal with, and that most of them even ignore the most pressing problems; and that for these reasons (not because they cannot be *justified*) they are held irrationally when they are held at all. Theologians have in the past drawn their own and others’ attention away from decisive criticisms of their theories by insisting—quite rightly—that their opponents could not justify their views either. But, as we have seen, the notion of justification can be

³¹See diagram in appendix 5 below.

eliminated from the notion of criticism.

Whereas many philosophers have argued that we can decide as we please, freely and irrationally, between two unjustifiable theories, I suggest that we can decide freely and irrationally, as a matter of taste, only between two theories against which there exist no criticisms one is unable to defeat. This reduces the area of whim considerably: there are no important positions that can be justified in the required way, but there are few important traditional philosophical positions against which no decisive criticisms exist. Moreover, once the retreat to commitment involved in the justificational framework is no longer necessary, then it is also no longer possible to avoid facing these criticisms by citing the *tu quoque*.

6 THE BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNICATION

“Where do you come from?” said the Red Queen.

Alice explained that she had lost her way.

“I don’t know what you mean by *your way*”, said the Queen, “all the ways about here belong to me—but why did you come out here at all?” she added in a kinder tone. “Curtsy while you’re thinking what to say. It saves time.”

—LEWIS CARROLL

So far, our discussion has focused on the historical and philosophical ramifications of the new Protestant thought; we have not inquired into its practical implications. If Protestant theology were, as is sometimes suggested, a subject mainly for seminaries and theologians, the matter could perhaps rest here—the story of an interesting and understandable, if unfortunate, intellectual development. However, the new Protestant thought and its strategy of defense have occasioned some important practical results, a few of which I shall try to indicate in this and the following chapter. As soon as we turn to the practical aspects, the issue of integrity within Protestantism becomes more complicated than it was on the strictly theoretical level. The very fact that Protestant leaders were able to preserve a considerable degree of philosophical integrity seems to have afforded many of them rather easy consciences about a number of practical matters. I shall turn first to some of these results within Protestantism, then to some of the broader social repercussions.

1. Agreement and Disagreement

An observer of contemporary Protestant life who is familiar with its history must often be struck by a kind of paradox. Whereas Protestants agree and cooperate more than ever before, they also disagree more radically than