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Introduction: the problem of a priori justification

§1.1. THE NEED FOR THE A PRIORI

Perhaps the most pervasive conviction within the Western epistemological tradition is that in order for a person's belief to constitute *knowledge* it is necessary (though not sufficient) that it be justified or warranted or rationally grounded, that the person have an adequate *reason* for accepting it. Moreover, this justifying reason must be of the right sort: though one might accept a belief for moral reasons or pragmatic reasons or religious reasons or reasons of some still further sort and be thereby in a sense justified, such reasons cannot satisfy the requirements for knowledge, no matter how powerful, in their own distinctive ways, they may happen to be. Knowledge requires instead that the belief in question be justified or rational in a way that is internally connected to the defining goal of the cognitive enterprise, that is, that there be a reason that enhances, to an appropriate degree, the chances that the belief is *true*. Justification of this distinctive, truth-conducive sort will be here referred to as *epistemic justification*.¹

¹ For more extensive discussion of the general conception of epistemic justification, see my book *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Bonjour 1985; hereafter cited as *SEK*), chapter 1. Certain recent philosophers have questioned, or seemed to question, this requirement for knowledge, arguing instead that knowledge requires only that the process leading to the acceptance of the belief in question be *reliable*, i.e., that it in fact produce or tend to produce true beliefs, even though the person in question may have no reason of any sort for thinking that this is so (where this variant requirement may be presented as either a competing account of justification or as an alternative to the justification requirement). See, e.g., Nozick (1981), chapter 3; and Goldman (1985). My conviction is that views of this kind are merely wrong-headed and ultimately uninteresting evasions of the central epistemological issues. But I have dealt extensively with them elsewhere (and no doubt

Historically, most epistemologists have distinguished two main sources from which the epistemic justification of a belief might arise. It has seemed obvious to all but a very few that many beliefs are justified by appeal to one's sensory (and introspective) *experience* of the world. But it has seemed equally obvious to most that there are other beliefs, including many of the most important ones that we have, that are justified in a way that does not depend at all on such an appeal to experience, justified, as it is usually put, by reason or pure thought alone. Beliefs justified entirely in the latter way are said to be justified *a priori*, while beliefs justified at least partially in the former way are said to be justified empirically or *a posteriori*. As this suggests, the justification of some (indeed probably most) beliefs may derive in part from each of these sources; as the terms are standardly used, the justification of such beliefs counts as *a posteriori*, but this terminological point should not be allowed to obscure the possibility that the *a priori* component may be both substantial and, in many cases, essential. In spite of its historical prominence, however, the very idea of *a priori* epistemic justification has over the last half century or so been the target of severe and relentless skepticism. Thus it may be useful to begin our discussion by considering, briefly and provisionally, three reasons why this venerable idea should still be taken seriously.

First. The most familiar and obvious appeal is to putative examples of knowledge whose justification, it is alleged, can only be construed as *a priori*. Here the leading examples are propositions of logic and mathematics; but there are a multitude of others as well, ranging from seemingly commonsensical truths such as “nothing can be both red and green all over at the same time” or “if

will again in future work) and so will mostly neglect them in the present work, where my main aim is to consider one crucial element of a more traditional epistemological position. See *SEK*, chapter 3; “Nozick, Externalism, and Skepticism,” in Luper-Foy (1987), pp. 297-313; and “Replies and Clarifications,” in Bender (1989), pp. 276-92.

one event is later than a second and the second is later than a third, then the first is later than the third,” on the one hand, to alleged truths of metaphysics such as “a physical object cannot be in two places at the same time” or “every event must have a cause,” on the other. Although perhaps no one would wish to defend all of the particular examples that have been proposed in this connection, they are undeniably impressive when taken as a group, and it is no accident that the vast majority of historical philosophers, from Plato on down to Leibniz and Locke, would have regarded this general line of argument as both obvious and conclusive, so much so that the issue of whether there is *a priori* justification scarcely arises for them at all. As will emerge much later (mainly in §4.2), the perceived cogency of examples of these kinds, and perhaps others, is ultimately crucial for the defense of *a priori* justification.

Nonetheless, the appeal to such examples can be resisted, at least initially, in ways that may seem to deprive it of much of its force. Some examples, such as the causal principle cited above, may be dismissed as not being epistemically justified at all; and others may be argued to be grounded ultimately, albeit tacitly, in experience. (I ignore for the moment the less extreme tactic of claiming that the propositions in question, though indeed justified *a priori*, rest on definitions or linguistic conventions in a way that deprives the concept of *a priori* justification of most of its epistemological force; this sort of response will be considered extensively in the next chapter.) Such rejoinders vary widely in their intuitive plausibility, both in general and in relation to the various specific examples, but they are at least dialectically tenable so long as the present argument stands alone.

Moreover, the perceived force of this sort of rejoinder has been greatly enhanced in modern times by the apparent collapse of the appeal to *a priori* justification in the case that would for a very long time have been cited as the most obvious example of all: that of Euclidean geometry. Since geometry had been taken for centuries to be the very paradigm of *a priori* knowledge, the advent of non-Euclidean geometries and the apparent discovery that Euclidean geometry, far from being unchallengeably justified

and indeed certain on an *a priori* basis, was in fact false — indeed that this could seemingly be shown *empirically* — led quite naturally to a massive loss of confidence in alleged *a priori* justifications. While it is not in any way obviously legitimate to generalize in this way from what is arguably a rather special case, the collapse of this historically favorite example of *a priori* justification has deprived the general argument from examples of much of its persuasive power: who is to say, it is likely to be asked, that the result in the case of geometry will not eventually be found to extend to the other examples as well?² Thus it is important to see that there are other, more general considerations that can be used to buttress the appeal to examples.

Second. Contrary to the tendency in recent times for even those who accept the existence of *a priori* justification to downgrade its epistemological importance, it is arguable that the epistemic justification of at least the vast preponderance of what we think of as empirical knowledge must involve an indispensable *a priori* component — so that the only alternative to the existence of *a priori* justification is skepticism of a most radical kind.

The argument for this conclusion is extremely straightforward and obvious, so much so that it is very hard to understand the widespread failure to acknowledge it. It derives from reflecting on the relation between knowledge and experience. For present purposes, I shall suppose that there are certain “foundational” beliefs that are fully justified by appeal to direct experience or sensory observation alone. We need not pause to worry about just which beliefs these are, for example, whether they concern ordinary physical objects or perhaps only private experiences; all that matters for present purposes is that, as will be true on any

² A second example of failed *a priori* justification, which has been at least as influential in narrowly philosophical circles, is set theory, where propositions that seemed at one time to be justified *a priori* turned out to lead to contradiction.

conception of direct experience that has any plausibility or indeed that has ever been held, such beliefs are particular rather than general in their content and are confined to situations observable at specific and fairly narrowly delineated places and times. The obvious and fundamental epistemological question then becomes whether it is possible to infer, in a way that brings with it epistemic justification, from these foundational beliefs to beliefs whose content goes beyond direct experience or observation: beliefs about the past, the future, and the unobserved aspects of the present; beliefs that are general in their content; or beliefs that have to do with kinds of things that are not directly observable.

If the answer to this question is “no,” then the upshot is a quite deep form of skepticism (exactly how deep will depend on one’s account of the foundational beliefs — perhaps even solipsism of the present moment). But if the answer is “yes” then such inferences must seemingly rely on either premises or principles of inference that are at least partially justified *a priori*. For if the conclusions of the inferences genuinely go beyond the content of direct experience, then it is impossible that those inferences could be entirely justified by appeal to that same experience. In this way, *a priori* justification may be seen to be essential if extremely severe forms of scepticism are to be avoided.

Third. The previous argument may be generalized in the following way. I have spoken so far as though the object of epistemic justification in general and *a priori* justification in particular is always a belief that some *proposition* or *thesis*, something capable of being either true or false, is true. But this way of putting things, though a harmless simplification when correctly understood, has the potential to be seriously misleading in one important respect, which must now be attended to. What it leaves out, or at least obscures, is perhaps the most cognitively indispensable application of the idea of the *a priori*: its application to arguments or inferences, to *reasoning*.

An *argument* is a set of beliefs or statements, or more precisely a set of propositions believed or stated, one of which (the

conclusion) is claimed to follow from the others (the premises); the argumentative transition, in thought or discourse, from the premises to the conclusion is an *inference*.

For any argument an issue that is closely analogous to the issue of epistemic justification for propositions can be raised: is there any reason for thinking that the conclusion of the argument either must be true or else is likely to be true *if* the premises are true? When such a reason exists, the argument in question may be said to be rationally cogent and the inference in question to be, in a somewhat modified sense, epistemically justified; where no such reason exists, the argument has no rational force and the inference is epistemically unjustified.³ And the *a priori*—*a posteriori* distinction can also be extended to this variant kind of epistemic justification in an obvious way: if the reason for thinking that the conclusion will be true if the premise is true involves an appeal to experience of the world, in the sense explained above, then the inference is justified *a posteriori*; whereas if the reason is independent of any such appeal to experience, the inference is justified *a priori*. (As before, justification that is partially based on experience and partly independent of experience will be classified as *a posteriori*, but this of course does not alter the fact that such justification is partially *a priori* in character.)

Could an argument of any sort be entirely justified on empirical grounds? It seems clear on reflection that the answer to this question is “no.” Any purely empirical ingredient can, after all, always be formulated as an additional empirical premise. When all such premises have been explicitly formulated, either the intended conclusion will be explicitly included among them or it will not. In the former case, no argument or inference is necessary, while in the latter case, the needed inference clearly goes beyond what can be derived entirely from experience.⁴ Thus we see that the

³For a particular person to be justified in accepting the conclusion of such an argument on the basis of a prior acceptance of its premises, the reason in question must, I assume, be in some way available to him.

⁴This is not to deny that in practice we can and do employ empirical elements that function as principles of inference rather than as premises: e.g., the principle that a certain sort of frown

repudiation of all *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally, thus amounting in effect to intellectual suicide. This result will be examined further below, in Chapter 3, when I consider views, like those of Quine, that advocate such a repudiation, but it surely constitutes a strong *prima facie* reason for regarding the idea of *a priori* justification as philosophically and intellectually indispensable.

There is, of course, an intimate relation between the justification of inferences, as thus understood, and the justification of propositions or theses. For any argument, we may form the corresponding conditional, that is, the truth-functional conditional whose antecedent is the conjunction of the premises of the argument and whose consequent is its conclusion. The original inference will then be epistemically justified, in the sense just explained, if and only if this conditional proposition is epistemically justified in our original sense; and the classification of the justification as *a priori* or *a posteriori* will be the same for both inference and proposition. Because of this parallelism, it is sufficient for many purposes to confine our explicit attention to the *a priori* justification of propositions, and this is the course that will be largely followed here. Such an approach is apt to be misleading, however, insofar as it obscures the fact that the need for *a priori* justification is not confined merely to propositions accepted on a non-empirical basis, but extends also to reasoning itself.

These three arguments seem to me at the very least to constitute powerful *prima facie* reasons for resisting the prevailing skepticism concerning *a priori* justification. But while the need for

indicates puzzlement on the part of the person exhibiting it or that a certain distinctive smell indicates that the food being cooked is starting to scorch. But the full justification of any inference that relies on such an empirical principle would presuppose an *a priori* justification for the transition (presumably inductive in character — see Chapter 7) from observations proper to the empirical principle in question and would also rely on *a priori* principles of logic to justify the transition from the empirical principle and specific observations to the conclusion. (I am indebted for this clarifying point to the referee.)

a priori justification is in this way apparent, the precise character of the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* justification remains more than a little obscure, and this obscurity is seriously compounded, as we shall see, by the still prevalent tendency to confuse or conflate it with other distinctions in the same dialectical vicinity. Thus it is necessary to begin by attempting to elucidate and clarify the main distinctions in the area: the *a priori-a posteriori* distinction itself, the necessary-contingent distinction, and, in a more provisional way, the analytic-synthetic distinction. This will be the main job of the next two sections. In the course of this discussion, we will also take a preliminary look at the main alternative positions on the nature and possibility of *a priori* justification, positions that will be considered in more detail in succeeding chapters.

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§1.3. THE *A PRIORI* AND THE NECESSARY

Understood in the way just indicated, the *a priori—a posteriori* distinction is obviously closely related to the distinction between necessary and contingent truths, and this no doubt accounts in substantial part for the tendency of many previous philosophers to treat the two distinctions as identical. As Kripke, among others, has pointed out⁵, however, this is a serious blunder, for the two distinctions, far from being identical, are not even distinctions of the same general kind: while the *a priori-a posteriori* distinction is, as we have seen, an *epistemological* distinction having to do with the way in which a claim or assertion is epistemically justified, the necessary-contingent distinction is a *metaphysical* distinction having to do with the status of a proposition in relation to the ways the world might have been (and having no immediate bearing on knowledge or justification).

⁵ Kripke (1972), pp. 260-3, 275.

A proposition is *necessary* (necessarily true) just in case it is true in all possible worlds, that is, true in any possible situation that obtains or might have obtained, such that, in the strongest possible sense, it had to be true and could not have been false; it is *contingent* if it is true in some possible worlds or situations and false in others, so that its truth value, whatever it in fact may actually be, might have been different (contingently true if the actual world is included in the former group of worlds, contingently false if it is included in the latter). A necessary falsehood, obviously enough, is true in no possible world or situation. It is sometimes objected that this sort of characterization, relying as it does on the correlative notion of possibility, is essentially circular and thus of little help, but this seems to me mistaken. While it is obviously true that necessity and possibility are correlative, interdefinable concepts, it seems clear on reflection that it is the idea of possibility, of a world or situation that might have obtained, that is intuitively primary. A possible world is a way things might have been, a comprehensive situation that might have been real or actual, and this idea seems to be intuitively intelligible without any direct appeal to the notion of necessity.⁶

What is the relationship between these two distinctions? Though drawn on quite different bases, one epistemological and one metaphysical, it is of course still possible that they might turn out to fall in the same place within the class of propositions, that is, that necessity might in fact coincide with apriority and contingency with aposteriority. Such a coincidence thesis, as I will call it, has in

⁶ For an opposing view, see Bealer (1982), pp. 205-9. Bealer rejects the possible worlds definition of necessity as circular and offers his own: a proposition is necessary if it corresponds to a necessary condition (possible state of affairs); and a condition x is necessary if it is identical to some specimen necessary condition (Bealer chooses the condition that x is self-identical), for unlike propositions, all necessarily equivalent conditions are identical. (Bealer has an elaborate and systematic argument for this view of conditions.) But I am unable to see why this does not finally amount to saying that a proposition is necessary if it is *necessarily* equivalent to some further proposition recognized as necessary — which seems both circular and unhelpful (since we are given no account of the necessity of the sample proposition).

fact often been held by those philosophers who do not simply conflate the two distinctions.

In fact, the conception of *a priori* justification adopted above already comes at least very close to incorporating part of the coincidence thesis: if *a priori* justification cannot appeal to any causally mediated process that yields information about this world as against other possible worlds, then whatever ground an *a priori* claim possesses, since it seemingly cannot pertain specifically to this world, will therefore extend just as well to any other possible world. It is tempting to conclude that propositions justified in this way must be justified in relation to any possible world if they are justified at all, and hence that apriority entails truth in all possible worlds, that is, necessity.

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§1.4. RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

One main goal of this book is to arrive at an understanding of the nature, rationale, and limits of the *a priori* variety of epistemic justification. It is obvious that the initial conception of such justification offered above is predominantly negative in character: *a priori* justification is justification that does *not* depend on experience. But where then does such justification come from? How is the positive idea, briefly mentioned above, of justification by pure thought alone to be understood? Putting aside for the moment the ubiquitous possibility of skepticism, the answers to this question that are to be found in the epistemological literature are standardly classified under two main rubrics: rationalism and empiricism.

According to *rationalism*, *a priori* justification occurs when the mind directly or intuitively sees or grasps or apprehends (or perhaps merely seems to itself to see or grasp or apprehend)⁷ a

⁷ As we shall see in Chapter 4, the rationalist must concede, contrary to the main historical

necessary fact about the nature or structure of reality. Such an apprehension may of course be discursively mediated by a series of steps of the same kind, as in a deductive argument. But in the simplest cases it is allegedly direct and unmediated, incapable of being reduced to or explained by any rational or cognitive process of a more basic sort - since any such explanation would tacitly presuppose apprehensions of this very same kind. According to the rationalist, the capacity for such direct intellectual insight into necessity is the fundamental requirement for reasoning and reflective intelligence generally. Perhaps in part because it is taken by them to be so pervasive and fundamental, rationalists have typically had little to say directly about this capacity, focusing instead on more specific problems and issues and taking the general capacity itself almost entirely for granted. This in turn has lent support to the charge that there is something mysterious, perhaps even somehow occult, about the capacity in question. From a rationalist perspective, however, as we will see further in Chapters 4 and 5, nothing could be further from the truth: the capacity for rational insight, though fundamental and irreducible, is in no way puzzling or especially in need of further explanation; indeed without such a capacity neither puzzles nor explanations would themselves be rationally intelligible.

As alluded to above, rationalists (along with at least most moderate empiricists) have standardly made two stronger claims about *a priori* justification: first that such justification not only involves no positive appeal to experience but also is incapable of being refuted or even undermined by experience to any degree; and, second, that knowledge justified in this way is certain or infallible, incapable of being mistaken. These two claims raise difficult and complicated issues that will be considered at length in Chapter 4. But neither of

tradition, that what appears subjectively to be such a seeing or grasping or apprehending may fail to be one, most strikingly in the case where the proposition that seemed to be necessary turns out to be false. But he must insist nonetheless that in at least some such cases the apparent seeing or grasping or apprehending can still provide epistemic justification for accepting the claim in question. More on this below.

them is in any obvious way essential either to the central conception of *a priori* justification or to the main rationalist thesis that intellectual insight (or apparent insight) of the sort in question is an independent source of epistemic justification, one that is capable of providing at least a *prima facie* adequate reason for the acceptance of a claim as true in a case where positive support from experience is unavailable. Moreover, a moderate rationalism that does not endorse these stronger claims could still be quite sufficient to meet the demands posed by the three arguments for the existence of *a priori* justification discussed in §1.1. Thus it will be useful and will do no harm to limit ourselves for now to this more modest version of rationalism (which will in fact ultimately prove to be the most defensible one).

Throughout most of the history of philosophy, rationalism was the dominant, indeed almost entirely unchallenged view of the nature of *a priori* justification. Plato was the first great proponent of rationalism; but though Aristotle accorded a more significant cognitive role to experience, he was just as much a rationalist in the sense specified, as were virtually all of his medieval successors. Descartes and Spinoza were rationalists, of course, as, on the whole, was Leibniz.⁸ But so were Locke and pretty clearly also Berkeley (despite the absence of any very specific pronouncement by him on the issue).

It is thus not until Hume that we find a major philosopher who clearly repudiates the rationalist capacity for insight into necessary truths pertaining to reality, insisting that *a priori* justification concerns only “relations of our ideas” as opposed to “matters of fact.” Superficial impressions to the contrary notwithstanding,

⁸ By virtue of his insistence that all necessary truths rest at bottom on the law of identity, Leibniz is a somewhat more problematic case and may be seen as taking the first step toward the moderate empiricist idea that *a priori* justification pertains only to tautologies. What makes this construal one-sided at best is his attribution of *a priori* justification to metaphysical claims of the strongest sort imaginable.

Kant (as discussed further in the next section) is in fact much closer to a Humean version of empiricism than to rationalism, but, excepting only Mill, clear examples of empiricism are hard to find in the period after Kant until the advent of positivism in Comte and Mach. Since that time, however, empiricist skepticism about the *a priori* has become more and more prevalent and, mainly in a specific form deriving from Hume and Kant, has been the dominant view for most of the twentieth century, at least in the Anglo-American world.

The underlying motivation for empiricist doubts is a deep-seated scepticism about the supposed capacity for rational insight into necessity to which the rationalist appeals. To the self-proclaimed hard-headed empiricist, the idea of such a capacity, or at least of its existence in human animals, appears implausible on both metaphysical and scientific grounds, and becomes even more so as our knowledge of human beings and their place in the world develops. But until very recently most empiricists have also found the existence of *a priori* justification and knowledge, in logic and mathematics at least, quite undeniable. It is thus incumbent on such empiricists to offer an alternative account of this justification, one that from their standpoint is metaphysically and scientifically more palatable than rationalism.

Although hints can be found in various earlier authors, especially in Locke and Leibniz, the main idea on which such an alternative account relies does not emerge clearly until Hume and especially Kant. The view that results, which I will refer to here as *moderate empiricism*, attempts to concede the existence of *a priori* justification and *a priori* knowledge while minimizing its ultimate cognitive significance. The basic claim of the moderate empiricist is that *a priori* epistemic justification, though genuine enough in its own way, extends only to propositions that reflect relations among our concepts or meanings or linguistic conventions, rather than to those that make substantive claims about the character of the extra-conceptual world. *A priori* justified propositions are thus ultimately trivial or tautological in character, and hence the

justification for believing them requires nothing as outlandish as the rationalist's alleged intuitive insight into necessity.

The moderate empiricist view is most standardly formulated as the claim that all *a priori* justifiable or knowable propositions are *analytic*. But, as is much more fully explained in the next chapter, the term 'analytic' is more than a little problematic, due to its having been defined in a wide variety of ways, by no means obviously equivalent to each other. This is a familiar enough situation in philosophy (and elsewhere), but the reason for it in this case is rather unusual and bears an important relation to the general problem at issue. In effect, the concept of analyticity has come to be specified more by the argumentative or dialectical role that it is supposed to fill than by any generally accepted definition. Specifically, the moderate empiricist hopes to establish two correlative theses: first, that genuine *a priori* justification pertains only to analytic propositions; and, second, that the *a priori* justification of analytic propositions can be adequately understood in a way that does not require or depend upon the alleged capacity for rational or intuitive insight into the nature of reality advocated by the rationalist. Specific definitions of 'analytic' put forth by various moderate empiricists are simply attempts to find some concept that can fill this role, and it is thus hardly surprising that they vary quite widely from one moderate empiricist to another. What is somewhat more surprising is that the conviction that there *must* be some specific concept that can do this job is often very strongly held even in the absence of any definite commitment as to which concept might in fact work. (Kant's original conception of analyticity will be examined in the next section, and a relatively complete canvass of the various conceptions of analyticity will be offered in Chapter 2.)

There are two questions that must be asked about positions of this general type. The first and more obvious one, to which the major share of attention has been devoted, is whether it is indeed true that all plausible cases of *a priori* justification involve propositions that are analytic in the sense specified by the position in question. As

we shall see, this question is difficult enough for most of the specific versions of moderate empiricism to answer successfully. But the second and equally important question is whether the fact that a particular proposition is analytic in the chosen sense really yields a complete and adequate account of how acceptance of it is epistemically justified, an account that does not rely even tacitly on the rationalist appeal to substantive *a priori* insight which it is the main point of such positions to avoid. My main thesis concerning moderate empiricism, defended at length in Chapter 2, is that there is in fact no version of moderate empiricism, that is, no conception of analyticity, that can by itself account fully and adequately for even a *single* instance of *a priori* justification.

From a historical standpoint, moderate empiricism is clearly the main empiricist position on the subject of *a priori* justification; and although full-dress defenses of it have been infrequent of late, it continues, I believe, to be widely albeit somewhat less openly held. The most conspicuous recent position on the general topic of *a priori* justification, however, is a much more extreme version of empiricism. Associated mainly with Quine and his followers, this second and quite distinct version of empiricism, which I will here refer to as *radical empiricism*, rather than attempting to give an epistemologically innocuous account of *a priori* justification, denies outright its very existence. This might seem to indicate that for the radical empiricist, epistemic justification derives entirely from experience; but while, as we shall see, there is a sense in which this is so, such a characterization fails to give a very good picture of the radical empiricist view, because it fails to bring out the skeptical thrust of the position. Radical empiricism seems to me extremely problematic from an epistemological standpoint, but Chapter 3 will be devoted to an attempt to understand and evaluate it.

The central theses of this book are, first, that a rationalist view of at least the moderate sort indicated above is the only hope for a non-skeptical account of *a priori* justification and knowledge, and indeed for a non-skeptical account of knowledge generally (with

the possible exception of those parts of empirical knowledge, if any, that can be fully justified by appeal to direct experience or observation alone); and, second, that such a view is defensible and fundamentally correct. Rationalism will be developed and defended in detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. As is usual in philosophical discussion, however, a substantial part of the argument in favor of rationalism will derive from the objections to competing views, in this case to the various versions of empiricism that will be considered in Chapters 2 and 3.

A moderate rationalism

§4.1. INTRODUCTION

The argument of the previous chapters leads to the striking or perhaps even startling conclusion that empiricist positions on *a priori* justification and knowledge, despite their apparent dominance throughout most of the twentieth century, are epistemological dead ends: the moderate empiricist attempt to reconcile *a priori* justification with empiricism by invoking the concept of analyticity does not succeed, indeed does not really get off the ground; and the radical empiricist attempt to dispense entirely with such justification ends in a nearly total skepticism. The indicated conclusion is that a viable non-skeptical epistemology, rather than downgrading or rejecting *a priori* insight, must accept it more or less at face value as a genuine and autonomous source of epistemic justification and knowledge. This is the main thesis of epistemological rationalism and also the central thesis of the present book.

Obviously, however, such a result can be no more than tentative until the rationalist view has been explored more fully and shown to be defensible. For even if the objections to the two positive empiricist views are indeed decisive, as claimed here, the possibility remains that the negative empiricist claim is correct: that *a priori* justification as understood by the rationalist simply does not exist. If this were correct, then skepticism would be the correct conclusion with respect to *a priori* justification, even if, as argued above, such a skepticism would inevitably encompass most (or perhaps even all) putative empirical knowledge as well. A thoroughgoing skepticism of this sort is obviously massively

implausible from a commonsense or intuitive standpoint, but this cannot, in my judgment, be taken as a conclusive philosophical objection to it, so long as no clear epistemological alternative has been successfully explicated and defended.⁹

It is important to be clear at the outset, however, about what can reasonably be demanded of a defense of rationalism. It is obvious at once that there can be no general *a priori* argument in favor of the rationalist view and against skepticism concerning the *a priori* that is not intrinsically question-begging. Nor does any straightforwardly empirical consideration appear to be relevant here: the truth or falsity of rationalism is obviously not a matter of direct observation; and any sort of inductive or explanatory inference from observational data would, as we have already seen, have to be justified *a priori* if it is to be justified at all, thereby rendering the argument again circular.¹⁰

Thus, in a way that parallels many other philosophical issues, the case in favor of rationalism must ultimately depend on intuitive and dialectical considerations rather than on direct argument. Such a case will, I suggest, involve three main components: first, the arguments against competing views offered in earlier chapters (including, of course, the general argument that the repudiation of *a priori* justification restricts knowledge to the results of direct observation and amounts to intellectual suicide); second, an exhibition of the basic intuitive or phenomenological plausibility of the view in relation to particular examples, which will lead to a fuller statement of the rationalist position; and, third, responses to the leading and allegedly decisive objections.

⁹ For more on the difficult issue of the proper dialectical stance to take vis-a-vis skepticism, see *SEK*, §1.3.

¹⁰ As we shall see later on, there is a sense in which the truth of the general rationalist thesis (assuming that it is true) can only be an empirical matter, though not in a way that provides any direct response to skepticism about the *a priori*.

The first of these components has already been presented in the preceding chapters (though some further elaboration, in the slightly more specific context of the classical Humean problem of induction, will be offered later, in Chapter 7). I begin the account of the second component in the next section by considering a modest selection of the wide variety of examples that illustrate and indeed at an intuitive level virtually demand a rationalist construal. My claim is that the *prima facie* case for rationalism that is provided by examples of these kinds is extremely obvious and compelling, sufficiently so when taken together with the failure of the alternative positive views to put the burden of proof heavily upon the opponents of rationalism. The balance of the present chapter will then be devoted to stating, refining, and clarifying the basic rationalist position. What emerges is what may be reasonably described as a moderate version of rationalism, one that rejects the traditional claim that *a priori* insight is infallible, while nevertheless preserving its status as a fundamental source of epistemic justification.

As already noted, rationalism has been generally repudiated in recent times, and indeed has often not been regarded as even a significant epistemological option.¹¹ My own suspicion is that much of the explanation for this repudiation is relatively superficial in character, that it is due more to arbitrary winds of philosophical fashion and a certain philosophical failure of nerve than to serious argument. Indeed, I think it is very plausible to think that many of those who claim to reject rationalism are in fact, though perhaps unbeknownst to themselves, committed to rationalism by their own philosophical practice. But be that as it may, it is clear that there are also objections to rationalism that need to be examined and assessed – objections which, though widely regarded as more or less conclusive, are seldom very fully articulated. Some of these objections are straightforwardly

¹¹ For example: in Chapter 7, I will argue that only an *a priori* justification can even hope to solve the problem of induction; but it is a striking fact that discussions of induction often fail to even list such a justification as one of the dialectical alternatives. See, e.g., Skyrms (1966), chapter 2.

epistemological in character; these will be considered in Chapter 5. Other objections are aimed at the perceived metaphysical commitments of rationalism; these more metaphysically oriented objections will be examined in Chapter 6.

§4.2. *A PRIORI* JUSTIFICATION: SOME INTUITIVE EXAMPLES¹²

In this section, we will consider several examples that illustrate the nature of *a priori* justification as viewed by the rationalist, beginning with what is perhaps the most familiar example of all.

Consider then, once again, the proposition that nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time. Suppose that this proposition is presented for my consideration (or, more or less equivalently, that I am somehow called upon to consider the cogency of the inference from the premise that a certain object is red all over at a particular time to the conclusion that it is not green all over at that same time). ...

As a second example, consider the proposition that if a certain person A is taller than a second person B and person B is taller than a third person C, then person A is taller than person C. ...

As a third example, consider the proposition that there are no round squares, that is, that no surface or demarcated part of a surface that is round can also be square. ...

Something very similar can also be said about simple propositions of arithmetic, for example, the proposition that two plus three equals five.

¹² All of the examples in this section are putative examples of immediate or intuitive *a priori* justification. There is also, of course, justification that depends on a series of *a priori* inferential steps, each step being itself a matter of immediate intuition. The nature of such *demonstrative* justification, and in particular the issue of whether it relies on memory in such a way as to render it no longer *a priori* in character, will be considered below, in §4.6.

Consider, finally, a logical example, which it will be more perspicuous to put in the explicit form of an inference. I am invited to assess the cogency of inferring the conclusion that David ate the last piece of cake from the premises, first, that either David ate the last piece of cake or else Jennifer ate it and, second, that Jennifer did not eat it (perhaps because she was at work for the entire time in question). In a way that is parallel to the earlier examples, the obvious construal of this case from an intuitive standpoint is that if I understand the three propositions involved, I will be able to see or grasp or apprehend directly and immediately that the indicated conclusion follows from the indicated premises, that is, that there is no way for the premises to be true without the conclusion being true as well.

...

From an intuitive standpoint, such an apparent rational insight purports to be nothing less than a direct insight into the necessary character of reality, albeit, in the cases discussed so far, a relatively restricted aspect of reality. When I see or grasp or apprehend the necessary truth of the claim, for example, that nothing can be red and green all over at the same time, I am seemingly apprehending the way that reality *must* be in this respect, as contrasted with other ways that it could not be. If taken at face value, as the rationalist claims that in general it should be, such a rational or *a priori* insight seems to provide an entirely adequate epistemic justification for believing or accepting the proposition in question. What, after all, could be a better reason for thinking that a particular proposition is true than that one sees clearly and after careful reflection that it reflects a necessary feature that reality could not fail to possess?

As observed above, the idea of such insight has been widely rejected in recent epistemology. It will strike many, perhaps most, contemporary philosophers as unreasonably extravagant, a kind of epistemological *hubris* that should be eschewed by any sober and

hard-headed philosophy. Once it is accepted that this sort of insight cannot be accounted for in any epistemologically useful way by appeal to the allegedly unproblematic apparatus of definitions or linguistic conventions, a standard reaction is to disparage it as objectionably mysterious, perhaps even somehow occult, in character, and hence as incapable of being accepted at face value – no matter how compelling the intuitive or phenomenological appearances may be, or how unavailing the search for an alternative epistemological account.

5

Epistemological objections to rationalism

§5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will consider a number of epistemological objections to the moderate rationalism outlined in the previous chapter. What qualifies these objections as distinctively epistemological in character is their underlying concern with whether and why rational insight, as characterized in the preceding chapter, can provide *epistemic* justification for a belief, in the sense specified in §1.1 above: that is, can yield a compelling reason for thinking that the belief in question is *true*. There can be little doubt that an apparent rational insight provides *some* sort of reason for believing the proposition in question. A belief arrived at in this way is certainly not merely arbitrary or capricious and may indeed be psychologically compelling to the point of being inescapable. But none of this shows that the believer in question possesses a genuinely *epistemic* reason for his belief, and it is this that the objections to be considered attempt to call into question.

I have already remarked that despite the widespread conviction that rationalism is untenable, fully developed and articulated objections to rationalism are difficult to find. This is especially true of the epistemological objections that are the subject of this chapter. Thus, while it is unlikely that anyone who has thought very much about the issue of *a priori* justification will find the general drift of these objections to be utterly unfamiliar, the specific presentations offered here are largely my own attempts to tease out and develop lines of thought that are usually only briefly

hinted at in the literature or, more often, in oral discussion (thus the relative dearth of specific citations). I believe nonetheless that the objections that will be discussed here are in fact the strongest and most important epistemological objections to moderate rationalism. If they can be adequately answered, then it seems most unlikely that any further objection of this general kind will pose a serious problem. (As will be seen, there is some overlap between the various objections. But I believe that their main emphases are distinct enough to warrant separate consideration.)

§5.2. THE VERY IDEA OF RATIONAL INSIGHT

The central focus of the first objection to be discussed is the *directness* or *immediacy*, the essentially non-discursive character of rational insight, as contrasted with other sorts of intellectual operations or processes. The basic suggestion, often left fairly implicit, is that while intellectual processes that appeal to criteria or rules or to articulated steps of some kind are thereby rendered intellectually transparent and hence capable of possessing rational force in a comprehensible and plausibly objective way, allegedly direct intellectual insights that involve no such appeal are fundamentally opaque and unacceptably subjective in character. How, it may be asked, can a supposed insight count as rational when it is arrived at on the basis of no intelligible process or objective criterion, no reason that is independently statable, but seemingly amounts merely to a brute subjective conviction? Is not the appeal to such an immediate and not further articulable insight essentially foreign to the very idea of rationality? Such seeming insights may no doubt be subjectively compelling, but, precisely because of their unarticulated character, there can be, it is alleged, no genuine basis for ascribing rational cogency to them - and in particular no reason to think that beliefs adopted in accordance with them are likely to be true.

What the proponents of the objection do not seem to have noticed, however, is that the application of any sort of criterion or the

employment of any discursive, stepwise process must ultimately rely on immediate insights of the very same kind that the objection is designed to impugn. In the first place, any criterion or rule itself requires justification, and an eventual appeal to immediate insight is the only alternative to an infinite and vicious regress. Second, less obviously but even more fundamentally, criteria or rules do not, after all, somehow apply themselves. They must be judged or intellectually seen to apply or not to apply, and this judging or seeing can in the end appeal only to the very same sort of rational insight or intuition that the rationalist is advocating.

Though a full discussion of the issues surrounding logical formalism is impossible here, I submit that this is true of the application of even the most severely formal rule of inference. Even to apply as straightforward and seemingly unproblematic a rule as *modus ponens*, I must see or grasp in an immediate, not further reducible way that the three propositions comprising the premises and conclusion are of the right forms and are related in the right way: that, for example, the two simpler propositions in question are in fact identical with the antecedent and consequent of the conditional proposition is as much a necessary, *a priori* knowable truth as anything else. Contrary to the view that seems to be assumed in many discussions, perhaps most commonly in elementary logic books, there is no way to somehow replace this act of insight with a purely mechanical appeal to linguistic forms and linguistic templates without utterly destroying the claim of the inference in question to be genuinely cogent. In many cases, of course, the requisite insight is extremely simple and obvious, making it all too easy to fail to notice that it is required. But the objection that we are presently considering makes no exception for simple and obvious insights, and could not do so without abandoning its central thrust.

...

The upshot is that the present objection, if cogent, would impugn *all* varieties of reasoning or non-observational judgment,

including, of course, those that lie behind this very objection itself. This is enough to show that a general skepticism about direct or immediate insight cannot be grounded on the contrast between such insight and supposedly more secure or respectable discursive intellectual processes. Indeed, the conviction that these rule-governed or stepwise intellectual processes are at least sometimes intellectually compelling and conducive to arriving at the truth should seemingly tell in favor of, not against, according the same status to the rational insights that are their essential preconditions.

What emerges from the discussion of this initial objection is that there is no apparent alternative to the reliance on immediate, non-discursive insights of some sort as long as any sort of reasoning or thinking that goes beyond the bounds of direct observation is to be countenanced. This being the case, the immediate and non-discursive character of rational insight cannot by itself provide the basis for a cogent objection to moderate rationalism. But the indispensability of rational insight does not by itself show, of course, that such insights are genuinely cogent or truth-conducive. This underlying skeptical concern is taken up, in somewhat different ways, by the succeeding objections.

§5.3. DOGMATISM AND BIAS

The next objection (or related pair of objections) argues that the moderate rationalist conception of *a priori* justification incorporates insufficient safeguards against abuse, specifically against the dangers of bias and dogmatism. What, the objection asks, is to prevent any person who is emotionally biased or intellectually dogmatic from regarding a claim that seems subjectively compelling to him as a product of such insight? In this way, it is alleged, a would-be rationalism in fact opens the door to the most obvious and blatant kinds of *irrationalism*, and the suggestion is that this risk of abuse makes it unacceptable to regard an apparent rational insight as a genuine reason for thinking that the belief in question is true.

There are two preliminary points that need to be made about this objection. First: It should be noted at the outset that the present objection is arguably dependent for at least much of its perceived force on the previous one. Any sort of intellectual process or method can, after all, be applied in a biased or dogmatic way, and at least part of the reason that this danger is perceived as more threatening here is that in other kinds of cases there is apparently something further to appeal to in seeking to eliminate the influence of bias or dogmatism: one can recheck the steps in the reasoning or re-apply the relevant criteria or rules, and this may seem to provide a kind of rational court of appeal that is lacking in the case of rational insight. We have already seen in the previous section, however, that any such invidious distinction between immediate intellectual insights and more discursive sorts of intellectual processes is ultimately self-defeating, because the latter rely essentially on the former and cannot exist without them. But although this reflection weakens the force of the present objection, something more specific still needs to be said.

Second: In dealing with the problem of bias and dogmatism, it is crucially important to get the issue into clearer focus than is sometimes achieved. Those who raise this problem commonly

formulate their objections in relation to an imagined public context of dialogue or argument. What, it is asked, is to prevent an emotionally biased or intellectually dogmatic person from *claiming* in an argumentative context that his favorite view is a product of rational insight and consequently in need of no further defense? It is of course quite true that such a person might make such a claim, and that this would be obviously objectionable, but it is unclear why this fact is supposed to constitute an objection to the idea of rational insight itself. There is, after all, no mode of cognition that is immune to perverse or frivolous claims of this kind. A person may certainly claim to have the rational insight that 2 plus 2 equals 5, but he may also of course claim to have seen a flying saucer or to have discursively proved a theorem that is in fact invalid. Such claims may be highly troublesome and annoying from a practical standpoint, and it may be difficult to deal with them in a way that does not threaten to disrupt the social fabric of argument or communication in which they occur. But it may nonetheless be perfectly clear in a given context that they are insincere, ill-considered, or both, and hence need not be taken seriously from an epistemological standpoint; and there is no apparent reason for thinking that this is somehow less true for claims of rational insight than for cognitive claims of other kinds. And even where the insincerity or frivolousness of the claim is not thus apparent, it would take a highly dubious verificationism or behaviorism to turn this fact into an epistemological objection to the central rationalist thesis.

...

§5.5. THE DEMAND FOR METAJUSTIFICATION

The penultimate epistemological objection is also the most straightforward, and can be seen to underlie several of those considered so far. It challenges the moderate rationalist to offer a second-order reason or justification for thinking that accepting beliefs on the basis of apparent rational insight or apparent self-

evidence is likely at least to lead to believing the truth. Without such a reason, it is claimed, the supposed *a priori* justification that results from rational insight will simply not count as justification in the relevant epistemic sense, and accepting beliefs on that basis will accordingly be quite irrational from an epistemic standpoint. To adopt a term that I have employed elsewhere, what is being demanded is a *metajustification* for accepting *a priori* insight as a source of epistemic justification.¹³

The demand for a metajustification is in effect a demand for an overarching premise or principle to the effect that beliefs which are the contents of apparent *a priori* insights - and perhaps which also meet some specifiable set of further criteria intended to distinguish genuine rational insights from merely apparent ones - are likely to be true. The implicit suggestion is that one who accepts a claim on the basis of such insight must be appealing, at least tacitly, to a premise of this sort as an essential part of the alleged justifying reason in order for a justification that is genuinely epistemic in character to even putatively result. And the obvious problem posed by such a view, already briefly noticed earlier, is that there is clearly no way in which the rationalist can hope to provide justification for such a premise itself. To construe it as justified empirically, for example, by finding that claims that are the contents of apparent rational insights are mostly true and generalizing inductively, is to abandon any claim to *a priori* justification: if it is essentially dependent in this way on an empirically justified premise, the justification of the original claim would be empirical as well. But to argue that the metajustificatory premise is justified *a priori* results in obvious circularity, since that

¹³ See *SEK*, §§1.3 and 8.1. One objection that is frequently leveled against the overall argument of *SEK* is that the argument offered there against foundationalism for empirical knowledge (chapters 2-4) is inconsistent with the subsequent acceptance of foundationalism in the case of *a priori* knowledge (appendix A), in that the metajustification that is demanded in the former case is not demanded in the latter. This objection has never seemed to me very compelling in itself, since the two kinds of knowledge are different enough that what holds for one need not hold for the other. But see note 11 for some further discussion of this issue.

premise would then in effect have to be appealed to for its own justification. Thus, if such a premise is indeed necessary in the way alleged, the rationalist view collapses.¹⁴

...

§5.7. CONCEPTS AND REALITY

There is one more broadly epistemological objection to moderate rationalism, or at least one more anti-rationalist line of thought, that needs to be discussed, one that could perhaps be advanced on either epistemological or metaphysical grounds. I hesitate to call it an objection, because that label suggests more specificity, both of content and of argument, than is usually present. What is at issue is rather more like a vague background assumption or attitude regarding *a priori* justification, one that may indeed in some cases amount to little more than a favored manner of formulating more specific issues. But the assumption or attitude in question nonetheless amounts, if taken seriously, to a thorough repudiation of rationalism, no less threatening for being relatively unarticulated and undefended.

...

For a more considered and explicit version of the same idea, we may turn to Michael Dummett. At the very beginning of his William James Lectures, he remarks, almost in passing:

¹⁴ As I have tried to make clear in the foregoing discussion, this problem arises only if the appeal to the metajustificatory premise is construed as an essential part of the original, first-order justification for the supposedly *a priori* claim. There is no problem with a metajustificatory premise or argument (for which the term 'metajustification' would in fact be more appropriate) that is not claimed to have this status. I am indebted to the referee for firmly insisting on this point, though he may still not be satisfied with all that I say here.

although we [contemporary analytic philosophers] no longer regard the traditional questions of philosophy as pseudo-questions to which no meaningful answer can be given, we have not returned to the belief that *a priori* reasoning can afford us substantive knowledge of fundamental features of the world. Philosophy can take us no further than enabling us to command a clear view of the concepts by means of which we think about the world, and by doing so, to attain a firmer grasp of the way we represent the world in our thought.¹⁵

Here the view in question is quite clear and unmistakable: *a priori* philosophical argument cannot tell us about independent *reality*, but only about our subjective (though for Dummett necessarily shared) *concepts*.

Anyone who has read at all widely in recent analytic philosophy will have no trouble coming up with further examples of this assumption or attitude, which indeed seems very often to be regarded as a mere truism. What needs to be asked is what the rationale for this pervasive view is supposed to be and, even more urgently, what the view in question really amounts to. But I should confess in advance that I am able to find no very satisfying answer to either of these questions.

The view in question could be construed as a lingering relic of moderate empiricism: if *a priori* claims are justified merely by appeal to our definitions or linguistic conventions, then it is plausible enough, as we have seen, to think that they tell us nothing about metaphysically independent reality. But we have seen that such a general view of *a priori* justification is thoroughly untenable. Moreover, it is a striking fact that the assumption or attitude with which we are presently concerned is often held by philosophers who make no very specific appeal to analyticity.

¹⁵ Dummett (1991), p. 1.

Clearly the main difficulty in trying to understand and assess such a view is to get clearer about what sort of thing a *concept* is supposed to be. While it is clear enough that concepts are at least roughly the philosophical descendants of the *ideas* invoked by earlier philosophers like Locke, and also that talk of concepts (or ideas or notions) often seems virtually unavoidable in philosophical discourse, none of that helps in any very immediate way to clarify exactly what such talk is about. Perhaps the clearest point of agreement is that the possession of the concept of an X by a person is to be identified with that person's having a certain cluster of intellectual abilities: the ability to think of X's, to classify things as X's, and, in some cases at least, to recognize X's in appropriate circumstances. But none of this makes it very clear how a concept can be itself an object of knowledge in a way that makes knowledge of concepts an alternative to knowledge of the world.

I am inclined to think that there is no very clear sense to be made of this idea. To have a concept is, as the foregoing suggests, to have the ability to represent and think about a certain property, relation, kind of thing, or whatever - where the item in question is usually represented as a feature or aspect of the objective world, of *an sich* reality. Thus if I have the concept of red, I have therewith the ability to think of things as red, to reflect on the property redness, and normally at least to recognize things as red. There is nothing wrong with saying that my rational insight or justified belief that, for example, nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time pertains to my concept of red (or redness), but this means merely, I suggest, that it pertains to the putatively objective property that I represent, not that it pertains to some distinct subjective entity, whose nature and metaphysical status would be extremely puzzling.

It is possible, of course, either: (a) that the property that I represent is not in fact instantiated at all in the world; or, less drastically, (b) that although it is instantiated, I misrepresent it in some significant way. (I am not suggesting that the distinction between these two

possibilities is sharp.) In case (a), my *a priori* justification still pertains to the world, albeit hypothetically: I am still justified *a priori* in thinking that no world can contain something that is red and green all over at the same time, and hence that this one does not. In case (b), if the misrepresentation affects the claim in question, then my claim is mistaken (though perhaps still justified if carefully arrived at, etc.); but this has no tendency, as far as I can see, to show that it is in any interesting sense a claim merely about my concept and not about the world. And, more importantly, even if someone insisted on characterizing either of these sorts of cases in this misleading way, there would be no justification at all for generalizing this to all cases of *a priori* justification and knowledge.

...

6

Metaphysical objections to rationalism

§6.1. INTRODUCTION

The main conclusion of the preceding chapter was that the distinctively epistemological objections to rationalism, while perhaps not entirely without force, are very far from being decisive. Indeed, it is more natural to construe the epistemological objections, taken as a group, as merely revealing various limitations of our *a priori* capacities. These limitations are no doubt unfortunate, but they cannot plausibly be construed as serious reasons for taking the quixotic step of abandoning rational thought altogether, or at least any claim of cogency on its behalf—which is what we have seen that the rejection of rationalism would amount to.

In any case, though such a conjecture would be impossible to verify, it seems to me likely that the reasons for the widespread dismissal of rationalism lie on the metaphysical rather than the epistemological side of the ledger. I have already voiced the suspicion that the intellectual motives for the rejection of rationalism lie more in the realm of fashion than of argument, but even the relevant fashions seem primarily metaphysical in character. My purpose in this chapter is to examine and evaluate some of these metaphysical fashions and objections.

As was the case with the epistemological objections, the metaphysical objections to rationalism are only rarely spelled out

and developed in any detail. It is clear, however, that most of them can be viewed as specific instances of one general claim: that rationalism is incompatible with allegedly well-established theses about the nature and limitations of human beings and human intellectual processes. These theses may take the form of sweeping, general claims, such as the vaunted theses of materialism (or physicalism) and naturalism, or they may be much more specific in character.

There are three general difficulties, worth noting at the outset, that apply in varying degrees to most of these objections. First, the characterizations of many of the supposedly incompatible theses are seriously vague or obscure (or both), making it difficult to be very sure what they really amount to. This is true of materialism and even more of naturalism, views which, despite their widespread acceptance or at least apparent acceptance, are very difficult to define clearly. Materialism presumably says that everything that exists is material or physical in character, but the precise boundaries of the material or physical are rendered seriously obscure by the expectation of continued progress in physics and related sciences: if some radically new kind of entity or process is discovered in the future, one that stands to physical reality as presently conceived in something like the way that electromagnetic waves stood to the seventeenth-century corpuscular conception of physical reality, what exactly will decide whether or not an acceptance of these new items is compatible with materialism? And naturalism is even more vague and diffuse, so much so as to make it doubtful that there is one central thesis that the various supposed proponents of naturalism could all agree upon.

Second, it is often unclear just how and why the allegedly well-established theses in question are supposed to be incompatible with rationalism, making it often very hard to assess the force of the supposed objections, even if the theses themselves were to be accepted. This is in part a result of the vagueness and obscurity already alluded to, but it is also attributable in part, it must be

admitted, to a good deal of uncertainty about what precisely the metaphysical commitments of rationalism might be. Like the preceding difficulty, and in large part as a result of it, this second difficulty also applies most obviously to the objections that are based on the more sweeping and general of the supposedly conflicting theses.

Third, though the theses in question are often treated as though they were obvious and unproblematic, the precise nature of the evidence or other basis for accepting them is often very uncertain. Not surprisingly, this also tends once again to be especially true of the more sweeping and general ones.

Most of this chapter will be devoted to a detailed consideration of two specific objections of this sort. But there is no space here for a detailed discussion of materialism or naturalism in general, and thus it is fortunate that there is a general rejoinder available, growing out of the third of the foregoing problems, that applies to all objections of this general form, a rejoinder that seems to me to be in fact completely decisive by itself.

The rejoinder in question is essentially just a specific application of the general argument for *a priori* justification that was offered in §1.1. The first thing to note is that the various theses in question are all both clearly synthetic in character and also sufficiently abstract and general to preclude any possibility of construing them as a product of direct experience or direct observation. Thus, if we ask what reason there is to think that these theses are true, there are apparently only three possible answers: The first is that there is no such reason, in which case the objection collapses because its central premise is unsupported. The second answer is that the claims in question are justified via inference from experiential or observational premises. But, as we saw in the earlier discussion, any such inference must rely, at least implicitly, on some premise or principle connecting the relevant observations with the intended conclusion. This premise or principle will not itself be a matter of direct experience or observation, so it will have to be justified *a*

priori if there is to be any reason for accepting it. The third possible answer, of course, is that the claims in question are themselves justified *a priori*. On either of the last two alternatives, therefore, the claims in question cannot provide reasons for ruling out *a priori* justification without entirely undercutting their own alleged justification. If the objection in question is otherwise forceful, it becomes in effect impossible that there could be a good reason for thinking that the allegedly factual premise to which it appeals is true: to suppose that there is such a reason leads, via the argument of the objection itself, to the conclusion that the reason in question was not a good one after all.

This general line of argument may seem entirely too easy, and proponents of the views in question are likely to be annoyed rather than persuaded by it in much the same way that the early positivists were annoyed by questions about the verifiability of the verification principle. I make no apology for this. It is a conspicuous feature of the contemporary philosophical scene that claims are made in metaphysics and other areas without giving adequate attention to the epistemological issue of how they might be justified, and that this uncritical practice makes the rejection of many traditional views and especially of rationalism seem enormously more palatable than it otherwise would. The line of argument just appealed to is the best corrective to this pervasive tendency and should, I believe, be invoked as often as necessary to do the job. Moreover, in addition to being an expression of the third of the general problems with metaphysical objections to rationalism outlined above, it also has the virtue of making an assessment of the other two far less urgent. Once we see on these general grounds that the theses that fuel the objections to rationalism cannot be both well-established and genuinely in conflict with rationalism, it becomes far less pressing to decide what they really amount to or whether the alleged objections would be cogent if the theses in question were known to be true.

But although my own view is that the foregoing counterobjection is in fact decisive against all metaphysical objections to

rationalism, it would be unwise to rely on it exclusively. Moreover, a more specific consideration of two of the metaphysical objections will also contribute toward a better understanding of the moderate rationalist view itself. The first of these two objections will be considered in the next section and the second in the balance of the chapter. ...