

ONTOLOGY AND CONTINGENCY

Kenneth Dorter

At least since Thales defied appearances by proclaiming the essence of all things to be water, the problem of the relationship between the appearance and essential truth of things has been paramount in philosophy. This is necessary, for if things appeared to us immediately in their essential truth there would be no need for philosophy but only for ordinary empirical acquaintance. This "common sense" acquaintance, however, for one reason or another leads ultimately to the realization of its own inadequacy, experienced as a sense of wonder or perplexity that carries our thoughts beyond what our senses perceive and gives rise to philosophical theory. The resulting conception of the essential truth of things thus necessarily differs sharply from what things initially show us of themselves, and the relationship between the two inevitably comes into question. We can hardly be led from the appearance of things to quite a different conception of their essence without wondering why this essence should appear to us in so unlike a form. It is this question of the relationship between the essence of things and their appearance that I want to explore in what follows. This essential truth has sometimes been designated "reality," with "being" reserved for the highest genus and thus what is most general and least real; at other times it has been "being" that names the essential truth, while "reality," derived from *res*, has been associated with the world as initially perceived. To facilitate comparisons the following discussion abstracts from these terminological distinctions, using "being" and "reality" interchangeably to refer to the essential truth of what is.

The conviction, out of which philosophy is born, that the immediately perceived world is not comprehensible in its own terms but points beyond our immediate experience for its truth, implies as well that the world not only appears in a form that is different from its reality but that this appearance is somehow deficient. Our question thus becomes: why should being manifest itself to us in a deficient appearance instead of appearing just as it is in itself? There seem to be two fundamental answers to this question.¹ The more recent one, advanced implicitly by Descartes and thematically by Kant, is that the nature of the mind is such that it tends to modify the object of its apprehension, so that the world, in appearing to us, appears differently from its being in itself. The older view, dating back to Plato and Aristotle, and more recently advanced by Hegel, is to identify

being or reality with the rational (Plato's ideas, Aristotle's god, Hegel's absolute) and claim that nature does not adequately embody this reality, so that even though the mind is capable of apprehending the natural world as it is *in itself*, the natural world is itself an inadequate manifestation of being.

In brief, if the way nature appears to the mind fails to convey true being, this must either be an inadequacy of the mind or of nature, and the above accounts represent these alternatives. The accounts do not yet, however, represent satisfactory explanations. Why is it, according to the first view, that the mind is so constituted as to distort the world, and why is it, according to the second view, that nature does not do justice to being? This question is crucial to ontology, for the distinction between being and appearance turns on it, and consequently so does the attempt to understand being. Significantly, despite the fundamental difference between the two views, their answers to this question may both be posed in terms of contingency, as we shall see in Section I from a consideration of some representative figures. But a dispute arises as to whether contingency is in itself irreducible, or an illusion dependent on human ignorance, and accordingly the concept of contingency itself examined in Section II. In Section III the results of that examination will be brought to bear on the dispute arising in Section I. It is not a dispute that can be conclusively resolved, but it is no less important to determine precisely what is at stake here, what difference it makes to our view of reality.

I

Plato's explanation of the deficiency of nature to the ideas is most readily seen in the *Timaeus*, where the rational creator seeks to create a world as perfect as possible (29a-30b), and manages to persuade Necessity to lead *most* of the things, that come to be, towards what is best (47e-48a). Accordingly, the world of becoming is characterized by rational goodness only for the most part; there remains an additional element of irrational necessity, which is then designated as the errant cause. This irrational necessity, the errant cause, evidently refers to some sort of contingency, just as a little earlier (46e) irrational causation had been identified with chance. Contingency in this sense is thus not opposed to necessity, but to reason; it means not an undetermined spontaneity, but a "blind" necessity which cannot be rationally justified or comprehended in terms of ultimate beneficence. Because Plato sees reality in terms of the rational, the irrational, the incomprehensible, is identified with incomprehensible unreality or nonbeing (cf. *Sophist*). The world of becoming, which consists both of

rational universality and contingent particularity, is described as intermediate between being and nonbeing. What is real, then, is what is rational, and the unreal is the irrational, the chaotic, random, and wholly contingent. Irrational contingency is thus the cause of being's becoming deficient appearance.

For Hegel, too, as he says in the famous passages in the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Encyclopedia*, "the rational is the actual and the actual the rational." The irrational, on the other hand, is not truly real but is "mere appearance," the merely contingent. Here, again, the contingent is opposed not to the necessary but to the rational: what is contingent may be mechanically necessary (determined by antecedents) but not rationally necessary. Thus, in the *Philosophy of Nature* it is often remarked that nature does not always adequately reflect the Absolute, due to the presence of contingency. So for Hegel too it is because of contingency that being takes on a deficient appearance.

With certain other philosophers, however, the case is much less clear. In Aristotle's metaphysics, for example, what corresponds to the distinction between being and appearance? And what place, if any, does such a distinction have in the philosophy of Kant?

Because Aristotle disputed Plato's view that universal forms are more real than individuals, holding instead that individual substances, although unknowable *as* individuals, are the only ultimate realities, he regarded the essences of things as the individual forms of each, not the universal species, qualities, or relations. From this there would seem to be no real distinction between reality and appearance—the individual entities that *appear* to us are also the ultimate realities—and no need of any ontology beyond empirical science. Aristotle is sensitive to this possibility and raises it, only to reject it by asserting that there is an entity, the god, which possesses a higher degree of being than the other substances and which, because it is separate from sensible things and is unmoved, is not accessible to empirical study (*Metaphysics* E 1). In the sense that the purpose of the existence of the world of finite things lies in its impetus toward the god (A7), the god is the ultimate reality of the world, and the ontological difference between the being and appearance of the world involves, therefore, the difference between what is unmoved and what is moved. Accordingly, in the following discussion, when I speak of "appearance" in Aristotle I am referring not to a phenomenal realm, but to the objectively existing individuals that *appear* to us in sense-perception, as opposed to the god, which does not so appear, but which is most real and which is the source (first and final cause) of the reality of the others.

But why should being movable (changeable) mean that we are less real than what is unchangeable? The answer is that being changeable means being bound up in potentiality, whereas the god is pure actuality. True being is what remains immutably in the most perfect state, while finite beings are capable only transiently of attaining such a state, since they must even then continue to change (A7: 1072b14-16, A9: 1074b25-27). From this it seems that the inferiority of appearance (sensible substance) as compared with reality (fully actualized substance) rests on the inferiority of becoming to being. But there seems no obvious reason why the realm of becoming must be inferior, why it cannot *as a whole* be adequate to being. In the *Timaeus* time is called the moving image of eternity. Why cannot such an image be faithful—an accurate temporal reflection of being (eternity)? Plato's answer is that motion is inseparable from contingency, due to the errant cause, but Aristotle denies that there is any principle contrary to the first cause (the god) (A10:1075b20-24). To get a clearer view of Aristotle's position it is therefore necessary to examine the nature of temporal substance and potentiality.

In this context there is perhaps something significant about Aristotle's technical term for the being of individual substances, usually translated as "essence." The Greek term is τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, which literally means "the what it was to be." The use of the past tense here has long been a source of puzzlement. It is possible, however, to understand it in terms of potentiality. If the being of a thing is to be found in its individuality, rather than its species or universal properties, it must involve all the infinite ways in which the individual differs from an unlimited number of other individuals. It must involve everything the individual can become, do, or suffer. That is to say, it must involve the totality of all the potentialities which ever attach to that individual. But this totality is present only at the very beginning of the individual's existence; the process of growth and development is a reduction of one's predicates as they pass from possibility to actuality, the actualization of certain potentialities at the expense of others. Before birth, for example, a fetus has the potentiality for a normal birth and the potentiality for a complicated birth, but as soon as it is born one of these alternatives is no longer possible for it. Thus, too, the nostalgia we often feel in looking back on times past is due in large measure to the fact that many possibilities that were before us then by now neither have been actualized nor remain open to us. But the fact that these possibilities once were open to me is part of my unique individuality and thus part of my essence, understood not as what I am, but as what I *was to be*. Accordingly, although Aristotle has a technical term for essence that is phrased in the present tense, τὸ τί ἐστίν or

"the what it is," he applies this term not to individual substances but to attributes or predicates, which are universal and unchanging.² Whether or not this is the reason for Aristotle's use of the past tense in the term τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, it seems in any case to represent his view of the unique, unitary, and unchanging essence of the constantly changing individual. Aristotle's insistence that potentiality is something real (e.g., A12,Θ3), though less real than actuality, means that the lapsed possibilities representing the infinite number of ways that *I could have* become quite different from what I now am, had I made different choices or had different influences and opportunities, are part of the complete determination of my being, although they are not part of my present state.

Here again, then, we meet with the problem of contingency, for contingency is presupposed in Aristotle's notion of potentiality. For Aristotle, to attribute a specific potentiality to a substance was to make a meaningful statement about that substance, not a statement about one's own ignorance. To say of a boy that he is potentially a man is not merely to say that I do not know whether or not he will live to manhood, but is also to describe a capacity of his nature: potentiality is a real attribute though less real than actuality. This would be meaningless if there were no such thing as contingency, for if all future events were rationally determinable, or predictable in principle, there would be no real potentiality attaching to things; instead there would be only uncertainty attaching to particular prognostications. In that case to say a particular boy is potentially a man does not describe a state of being (potentiality) in the boy but a state of ignorance in me: it would already be entirely determined either that the boy will become a man or that he will not, only I am not in a position to know.

It is illuminating here to compare Aristotle's position with that of Leibniz. Leibniz did not like to say that all events are necessary because he was always concerned to show that his position was compatible with traditional ways of speaking; but his conception of contingency and freedom was not fundamental and is ultimately reducible to necessity. Events may be called contingent in that one can conceive of them occurring otherwise without an obvious contradiction, nevertheless every event is entailed by the concept of its subject (substance) and the existence of every individual substance is entailed by its being a member of the best possible world. Similarly our will is free in that our choices result from deliberation rather than compulsion and we are accordingly responsible for them, nevertheless every event, including our choices, is entirely determined by its antecedents (e.g., *Discourse on Metaphysics XIII*).³ Like Aristotle, Leibniz regarded individual substances rather than universals as the ultimate realities and, also

like Aristotle, understood their essence in terms of the infinite number of ways in which an individual differs from other individuals. But Leibniz understood these differences not in terms of potentialities but actualities; the essence of an individual was not everything that the individual possibly *might* be but rather what in fact it *would* be: the totality of all predicates (not potentialities) that will ever apply to it. This entails that all truths are ultimately analytic since a proper conception of the subject already includes all true predicates, a consequence of Leibniz's belief that all things at all times are rationally determined and necessary (certain), the future being the inevitable unfolding of the present. According to this, of course, there can be no real potentiality, only ignorant observers. Here Aristotle disagrees. Although he agrees that every event is conditioned by its antecedents, and in that sense (mechanically) necessary, he does not agree that it is absolutely necessary or rationally necessary. It is not absolutely necessary, for the series of antecedent events is infinite and thus, since it has no beginning, it cannot have a necessary beginning (cf. *On Generation* II 11: 337b26-29); whereas Leibniz believed that there was a necessary starting point: God's formulation of the best possible world (*Discourse, Monadology*, etc.) or the exigency inherent in the best possible world itself (*On the Ultimate Origin of Things*). Nor are all events *rationally* necessary for Aristotle, for the connection between the cause and effect of what he calls chance events is merely incidental and, therefore, since the cause was not for the sake of its effect, such an event involves an irrational connection within the sphere of rational activity. Moreover, since the connection is indeterminate (*ἀόριστος*), it is in principle unclear to human comprehension (*Physics* B 5: 196b19-197a14). Thus chance is a privation of rational activity, as spontaneity is a privation of natural teleology (*Metaphysics* A3: 1070a6-9).

Aristotle shared Leibniz's view that being is both rational and good (*Metaphysics* A7) but, unlike Leibniz, he did not believe in creation *ex nihilo*, and therefore did not envisage the world as an unobstructed epiphany of goodness and reason. But neither did he accept Plato's view that there is a principle contrary to it, as we have already seen. His view is rather that matter, the basis of potentiality (e.g., $\Theta 7$: 1049a1927), admits not only those connections which are rational and good, but also those which are privations of them and consequently the former are present in the material world only in an imperfect and unstable way (e.g., $\Theta 9$: 1050b24-28; A9: 1074b28-29). Accordingly, the inadequacy of appearance to being has its basis in the possibility of these privations and, as we just saw,

these privations are precisely what Aristotle means by contingency.

The foregoing discussion may be outlined as follows: the inferiority of appearance (objectively existent individual beings that appear to our senses) as compared with being (the god) is ascribed by Aristotle to the fact that, unlike the god, what appears is changeable; the inferiority of the changeable to the unchangeable is that the changeable involves potentiality while the unchangeable is purely actual; the inferiority of potentiality to actuality is due to the fact that it is based upon contingency; and the inferiority of contingency is that it is irrational. It follows from this that the ultimate defect of individuals (appearance) as compared with the god (being) is due to irrational contingency. Thus, for Aristotle as for Plato and Hegel, what appears is rendered inadequate as compared with being because of the presence of contingency.

With regard to Kant's position on this question, we must first determine whether anything in Kant corresponds to the distinction between being and appearance. The distinction between noumena and phenomena seems the natural place to start, but the existence of noumena is always for Kant problematic, and whatever conception we may have of being, it would be meaningless if it could possibly not exist. Nevertheless there is at least one thing in itself whose existence cannot be doubted: the supersensible ground of my own self. Even though it may be doubted whether there are noumena which furnish the content of our experience, it cannot be doubted that there is something—which I can perceive not as it is in itself but only as modified by the form of temporality and appropriate categories—which furnishes both the formal element of our experience and the unity of apperception of that experience. The distinction between being and appearance thus applies to the Kantian philosophy in terms of the distinction between the thing in itself and the phenomena even if there is only one such thing in itself.

Hence the question, Why does being take on a deficient appearance?, must take the form, Why does the human mind distort reality and transform it into appearance rather than perceiving it as it is in itself? This, of course, is not the sort of question that Kant's position enables him to answer but there seem to be only two possibilities: either it necessarily follows from the nature of things that we must have precisely the kind of intuition we have, or we just happen to have this type of intuition but might as easily have had another. In other words, either it is rationally necessary or merely contingent. Kant was aware of this question and twice raised it in a problematic way at the end of the *Transcendental Analytic* (A256/B311, A286-87/B342-43). He here addresses himself to the possibility of an intellectual intuition after having alluded earlier to the possibility of other

forms of intuition than ours, whether intellectual or sensible (A27/B43, A230-31/B283)—a possibility which seems to have interested him far more by the time he wrote the second edition, to judge from the considerable number of additional references to it (xl n., 68, 72, 138-39, 148, 150, 159, 307, 309). Kant's answer, of course, is that we are in no position to know what might be possible outside the limits of our understanding. The *practical* consequence of Kant's position, however, is that the constitution of our mind must be treated *as if* it were merely contingent. Otherwise, if the nature of our mind were thought to follow by rational necessity from the nature of things, there would be a necessary connection between the two, on the basis of which the mind might be thought capable of inferring the true nature of the world as it is in itself. The effect of Kant's agnosticism is therefore to take the position that there is no basis for treating the constitution of our understanding as anything other than merely contingent, in which case, once again, the difference between being in itself and appearance is allowed to rest on contingency.

Kant's claim that we cannot establish a necessary connection between the constitution of our understanding and the nature of things represents a departure from the positions of such of his predecessors as Spinoza and Leibniz, both of whom took the view that, although the mind has a finite constitution that modifies its object, this constitution is nevertheless commensurate with the truth of reality, so that it has a power of intuition or introspection by which it can apprehend the true nature of things and overcome its proximate distortion. In both cases, this view is of course connected with their belief that there is no genuine contingency in the universe, all things being rationally necessary. Here, then, the difference between appearance and reality does not amount to the presence of contingency but follows by rational necessity.

Thus Spinoza and Leibniz, as well as Descartes (in places), see no ultimate deficiency in appearance, for it is the necessary manifestation of necessary being. It is distinguished from being not by an inherent inferiority but because of our finite constitution which perceives being in an aspect rather than in itself. Mistaking the aspect for the essence, we judge the parts out of context with the whole, and impute to the world defects that might have been surmounted, that is, contingency. Thus although the rationalists do not deny that appearance may be distinguished from being by contingency, they deny that contingency has any intrinsic existence and claim it is merely a reification, and projection onto the world, of the necessary ignorance of our finite mind.

The preceding discussion has suggested that the intrinsic fundamental op-

position of appearance to being has, where acknowledged, been attributed to contingency; and that where it has been denied, so has the ultimate distinction between contingency and necessity. In order to press our inquiry any further, therefore, it is necessary to examine the concept of contingency to see what light can be shed on this fundamental dispute.

II

The apparent presence of contingency in the world makes itself felt most immediately in the form of the accidental. An accident is precisely the sort of event that seems not to have been necessary but entirely contingent. It can, of course, be argued that there are no genuine accidents in the realm of ordinary experience, on the principle that every event has a cause, a principle that holds true for normal experience, even if not for subatomic events. But we nevertheless distinguish some events as accidental from other events as nonaccidental, so it is necessary to determine what is meant by calling them accidental. They are not called accidental because no causes can be found for them; on the contrary, causes can as easily be found for accidental events as for nonaccidental ones. An uncaused event would be termed spontaneous (not in Aristotle's sense) rather than accidental, and it is the existence of this sort of event that is properly disputed.

The meaning of "accidental" is suggested by its name, which means a "falling upon." But this is not at first very informative since any experienceable event may be described in an Aristotelian manner as some condition "befalling" a subject. Indeed, our understanding of any event is generally in terms of the relation between a subject and a condition which comes to qualify it. If the relation is intrinsic, as for example natural growth, we understand this relation in terms of the necessity of the subject's nature. If it is extrinsic we understand it in terms of the ground or reason for the connection between the subject and the condition that befalls it. When a rock falls we understand the relation between the rock and its falling in terms of some natural force or process, such as gravity or erosion. If, however, it is pushed, the event is made intelligible in terms of the motive for the pushing, such as the desire to test one's strength. From such "simple" events one may distinguish "complex" events that involve at least two elements neither of which is entailed by the other. To say that a rock is falling is thus to describe a simple event, and to say that it fell and hit something may also be to describe a simple event since landing (upon something) is eventually entailed by falling, but to say that the rock fell and hit this particular thing, or this particular kind of thing, is to describe a

complex event since the further specification does not follow from the mere act of falling. Now suppose the rock were pushed deliberately so as to fall upon and kill someone, as an act of revenge for some real or imagined injustice. In this case we have a complex event constituted by the rock's being pushed and the man's being hit, both of which have the same reason for the connection between their subject and condition, e.g., the intention to accomplish justice. But if the rock missed its intended victim, the complex of the rock falling and missing a man is now composed of two events which do not have the same ground. The falling of the rock is still due to the intention to accomplish justice but the rock's missing the man is due to some other reason, such as bad aim by the attacker, or the intended victim's noticing it in time to dodge. In that case we should say his intended victim was lucky, and we would thus, at last, have encountered an example of chance, an accidental failure of the attacker's plan, for neither a mistake in aim nor a telltale sound or movement were *entailed* by the act. This suggests that an accidental event is a complex of events which have distinct grounds. It is, quite literally, a co-incident.

To take an example uncomplicated by human motivation, suppose a rock accidentally (thus excluding divine retribution) fell and killed someone. Again we have a complex event composed of the rock's falling and the victim's being hit, and again the component events have distinct grounds. The reason for the rock's falling would be something like erosion, and the reason for the victim's being hit is that he happened to be underneath the rock when it fell. But to give a reason for the complex event we should have to show the reason for the connection of the two component events—the rock's falling and the victim's being where it would hit him—or show that the ground of one is derivative from that of the other, and neither natural, human, nor divine reasons would seem here to suffice. In this case, once again, we have a mere coincidence, a mere befalling, and hence a mere accident. The reason a chance event is called an accident, therefore, is not that *only it is* a befalling, but that *it is only* a befalling, a mere coincidence of a subject and a state of affairs with no apparent necessary connection.

A chance event is accordingly not one which is spontaneous, i.e., uncaused, but one which results from the confluence of two distinct factors. Each factor can, in principle, be accounted for by means of a causal series but each series appears to be independent and unrelated except for their intersection in the accident. The question thus arises as to whether any necessity can be found for this eventual interaction, that is, whether their independence can be shown to be only apparent. Where an immediate connection between the factors is evident the event is considered nonaccidental,

but even where no immediate connection appears perhaps there is some remote connection that will serve.

The obvious way to approach this would be to try to trace back the causal antecedents of each factor of the coincidence, in the hope of discovering some necessary and sufficient ancestor common to both. It immediately becomes apparent, however, that this cannot succeed, for an event is not the product of a single cause but of a confluence of a great many factors. Accordingly, as soon as one turns one's attention to even the immediate factors contributing to the events in a coincidence, one has not reduced the original two distinct events to a single common ground but instead multiplied them immeasurably. The falling of the rock is due, for example, to its weight, shape, placement, the kind of soil on which it was resting, the rate of erosion of the soil, weather conditions, etc. Similarly, the man's presence at that spot at the time is due to his desire to go some place, his decision to walk, the time of his departure, the rate of his progress, etc. If one persists in pursuing the antecedents of these factors as well, one will very soon arrive at an infinity of factors, in which case no rational account would be possible. On this account, in fact, even noncontingent events involve a background of contingency: an infinity of antecedent occurrences and connections leading up to the present situation.

Let us suppose, however, that some remote, single, necessary, and sufficient condition could be found for any coincidence. After all, although the antecedents of any event may be infinite, so are the consequences, and it is not impossible that the innumerable antecedents of a present coincidence might all have arisen from a single distant antecedent. Unlikely as this might be, would it in any case make theoretically possible the reduction of coincidence to rational necessity? It would certainly be too remote to make meaningful the present conjunction of events, but this would be a defect not in the nature of the explanation but only in the scope of our minds. A difficulty in the explanation appears, however, when we seek the necessity or rational justification of that hypothetical root event, as part of the necessity of the subsequent events it engendered. At this point we must carry the chain of causal antecedents back further still until, in theory, one reaches a stopping point in one of two ways: either by arriving at the absolute origin of the universe *ex nihilo*, or else by becoming involved in an infinite regress, in which case the stopping point represents not the attainment of one's goal but the recognition of its impossibility. In the former case one must then see whether this origin can itself be shown to be necessary. If it cannot, contingency turns out to be ineluctable, but if it can, then one can claim to have established an absolute necessity for all events, including accidents, by

showing them to follow from an absolute beginning (thus Leibniz). If, on the other hand, an infinite regress results, or if no single root event were discerned in the first place, one must see whether the whole infinite series can be shown to follow with rational necessity from the rationally necessary existence of an atemporal being or principle standing outside the series. If so, once again one can claim to have shown contingency to be an illusion (thus Spinoza, and Leibniz in *The Ultimate Origin of Things*). But if this cannot be shown, the existence of contingency must be granted, for necessity is definite and can never be derived from an infinite number of factors. Thus, both in Aristotle and in quantum physics, the notion of irreducible contingency is connected with the indeterminacy of an infinity of factors.

III

Those who hold that contingency is reducible to rational necessity, such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, see the world and its events as arising directly out of a rational necessity, whether abstractly and atemporally or as divine creation at a certain time, without any negative or privative principle to impede its rationality. The world involves nothing fundamentally contingent or irrational, any such appearance being solely the result of the limitations of our finite perception. Those, on the other hand, who do not see the world as originating in an immaculate conception of reason must view the world as involving some fundamentally irrational component which precludes, in principle as well as practice, a complete rational account of the world in all its detail.

Herein lie the differences among rationalism, empiricism, and dialectical rationalism.⁴ It is often supposed that the difference between rationalists and empiricists is either (from the empiricist point of view) that empiricists regard empirical observation as a necessary condition of knowledge, whereas rationalists believe that all knowledge should be deduced directly from reason and want nothing to do with empirical observation; or (from the rationalist point of view) that rationalists believe that certain natural principles of reason come into play in the acquisition of knowledge, whereas empiricists believe that acquiring knowledge is like throwing facts together in an empty box and deny that there are any natural principles of reason. The fact that neither side sees itself as the other does results from the one-sidedness of both accounts and, except with reference to certain extremist cases (*in philosophia non datur hiatus*), inaccuracy. Just as most empiricists readily concede that there are certain natural principles of reason or reflection (if only the basic rules of logic) that contribute to the

acquisition of knowledge, rationalists do not normally dispute the need for empirically observed data to serve as the material of rational thought. However, the difference between rationalism and empiricism is not merely one of degree. As our previous discussion showed, rationalism holds it as a fundamental supposition that the empirical world cannot be at variance with reason, and thus contingency must be a false appearance which disappears when properly understood. Empiricism denies this, holding it experientially obvious that in some respects nature exhibits irrational qualities. Here empiricism and dialectical rationalism both stand opposed to rationalism but they are opposed to each other as well. Empiricism takes the experience of irrationality in the world as an indication that the demands of reason are simply not applicable to experience and thus tends toward the skepticism of Hume;⁵ whereas dialectical rationalism holds that reason is present in the world, though not exclusively so, and thus tends toward a dialectical, if not dualistic, view of the world, distinguishing the rational factor from the irrational.

An indication of this difference between rationalism and dialectical rationalism may be found in their respective attitudes towards individuality. Since dialectical rationalism identifies reality with the rational, and understands individuality as involving irrational contingency, it regards individuals as something less than fully real. Thus even Aristotle, who has much higher regard for individuality than do Plato and Hegel, sees finite individuals as less real (actual) than the god. Rationalism, on the other hand, regards contingency as ultimately illusory and accordingly sees individuals as in no way lacking complete reality. From the rationalist point of view, common sense may err in emphasizing the apparent discreteness of individuals over their harmony or unity but it does not err in ascribing to them complete reality.

In accordance with the above half serious suggestion that philosophical positions constitute a kind of continuum (*non datur hiatus*), the distinctions I have just drawn are bound to be somewhat arbitrary, in that there are no precise boundaries between them. Locke, for example, is sufficiently closer to rationalism than Hume, that Hume derogatorily classes him with the likes of Aristotle and Malebranche.⁶ And Hegel is somewhat closer to rationalism than is Plato. Although both of them regard contingency as actually existing rather than an illusion, Hegel does not regard it as merely the brute fact that Plato seems to. For although he sees contingent facts as irrational and thus outside the reality of the absolute, the category of contingency is itself rationally necessary, a moment in the dialectic of absolute idea. In other words, it is rationally necessary that there be such a thing as

contingency in general although no particular contingent fact is rationally necessary. For Plato there could be no such thing as the idea of chance (as is suggested especially by the opposition of chance to the ideas in the *Timaeus*), but for Hegel there is: the antithesis within the concept of actuality (*Encyclopedia* No. 144-46). So while Hegel sees the world as a duality between the real (absolute) and merely existent (contingent), and sees the task of wisdom and ethics as the overcoming of the standpoint of particularity and contingency in favor of that of the absolute, he nevertheless sees this duality as dialectically founded upon a unity, and is thus closer to the rationalistic position than is Plato.

Apart from the boundaries *among* these positions, it is worth noticing as well the boundary *around* them. The present discussion has taken reason as the model of thought and intelligibility, thus excluding from consideration such positions as existentialism and much of oriental philosophy—for which the model is not reason but direct experience, with art therefore largely supplanting logic—and linguistic analysis, for which the model is linguistic convention. The difference this standpoint makes to the question of being, appearance, and contingency can be seen, for example, from Heidegger's lectures of 1935-1936, subsequently published as *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *The Origin of the Artwork*.

It is especially clear from the former work that appearance is not intrinsically opposed to being but is the essential nature of being, its intrinsic self-manifestation. Appearance is nevertheless inadequate to being because it involves concealment and the possibility of error, for it is bound up with non-being as well as being. But this is not a dualism; nonbeing is not absolutely opposed to being. The essence of being is appearing,⁷ and thus it is the essence of being to stand in a reciprocal relationship with nonbeing. Accordingly, "that nothing is not an entity does not prevent it from belonging to being in its own way" (94), and "for us even nothing 'belongs' to being" (71). Thus although being is inseparable from truth, unconcealment, it intrinsically tends toward self-concealment because of its reciprocity with nonbeing, and thus in its appearing does not appear in its essential truth. Appearance may therefore seem to be disorderly (*Unfug*) but this disorder is not something opposed to being but an intrinsic self-covering of being.

Heidegger thus stands on ground different from that of dialectical rationalism, rationalism, or empiricism, but there are noteworthy similarities. In common with dialectical rationalism is the dialectic between being and nonbeing in appearance, which manifests itself in such particular dichotomies as Earth and World (*Origin of the Artwork*) and the Overpowering and the Violent (*Introduction to Metaphysics*). But the terms of

these dichotomies do not simply correspond to being and nonbeing, and, unlike dialectical rationalism, the dialectic is intrinsic to the nature of its members and is neither overcome in a higher synthesis nor reflects an absolute duality. This lack of fundamental opposition between being and appearance is in common with rationalism; contingency is therefore as much revelatory of the nature of being as is what we call "necessity," as one can see especially from Heidegger's conception of "earth." However, unlike rationalism, Heidegger neither regards contingency as illusory nor intelligibility as rational. And this rejection of reason as the *a priori* principle of reality is in common with empiricism, although the rejection is in favor of poetry rather than scientific method. Thus the following discussion relates only obliquely to Heidegger and to other positions such as were mentioned above.

To consider now the general position of rationalism, we must inquire what evidence there is for its fundamental principle, that nothing in the universe is opposed to reason. Such evidence certainly cannot be regarded as self-evident, for the majority of mankind do not assent to the rationalist principle even when they have thoroughly understood it. Nor can it be regarded as empirically obvious, for although the world certainly manifests the presence of rationality, it does not exclusively do so, and we are presented as well with accidents and coincidence, including the avowed irrationality of evil, both natural and moral. On what ground, then, does rationalism stand? There are at least two answers to this, one philosophical, one religious. Philosophically, it seems to be based on the standard of "economy of principles." Since the workings of reason are evident in the world, is it not simpler to attempt to account for all the phenomena of the world in this way, rather than supposing a second principle opposed to this one, which would both needlessly multiply our principles of explanation and give rise to the thorny problem of the relationship of the dual principles? Thus, other things being equal, the monistic principle of rationalism is to be preferred to the dualistic or dialectical principle of dialectical rationalism. On the religious side, it is probably significant that modern rationalism arose in the West out of the theology of the Middle Ages,⁸ for the Judeo-Christian tradition sees the world as a product *ex nihilo* of a power both benevolent and omnipotent. If "benevolent" is taken to mean "will-ing what is rationally preferable," it follows that the world that God omnipotently created *ex nihilo* must be rationally necessary in every detail. Given this perspective, which gained prominence during the Middle Ages, the monistic position outlined above obviously gains in plausibility.

It remains for rationalism to account for the kinds of contingency and

evil which, as mentioned above, bias empirical evidence against its principle. We have seen that it regards contingency not as an ineluctable fact but as an appearance due solely to the inability of our finite understanding to perceive the rational necessity of all things. How then does it account for our having such limited intellects, when it would seem "better" for us to have minds capable of directly perceiving things as they are in themselves? This is a version of the "problem of evil" just referred to: Why is the world less good than it seems that it could be? Rationalism attempts to account for evil by means of a theory of a kind of natural linkage. Moral evil exists because it is inexorably linked with free choice that is itself rationally desirable; and natural evils, such as earthquakes, floods, famines, and disease, are similarly generated by conditions that follow necessarily from the nature of the best possible world. In both cases evil is seen as a necessary byproduct of the constitution of the world, a constitution that is itself rationally necessary on the basis of its being the best possible. Evil, like accident, is therefore an illusion, the result of our focusing on details in abstraction from the whole in relation to which alone they can properly be understood. And even the finitude of our mind, which is responsible for this illusion, must likewise be a necessary part of the best possible whole. If evil is thus reduced to a linkage with a greater good, what is the rationale for this linkage itself, why is goodness inseparable from evil? It cannot simply be a brute fact, for that would be to treat it as though it were accidental and irrational, and therefore as contingent. It must therefore itself be shown to be necessary. In the case of natural evil, the necessity of the linkage cannot be derived from material or natural necessity—the limitations or consequences of the material constitution of the natural world—for this again would amount to the admission of a brute fact without any rational necessity. The world must be explicable as if it were created entirely *ex nihilo* by the agency of reason alone. Thus the only sort of necessity by which the linkage between the highest good and concomitant evil can be justified is purely rational necessity, and the rational necessity that is usually invoked here is the principle of noncontradiction. It is urged, for instance, that free will is one of mankind's greatest goods, but that it entails the possibility of choosing to do what is evil, whereby moral evil is necessary in a rationally justified world.

It must in turn be asked what the nature of this freedom is, which is to justify the existence of moral evil. Obviously it means at least freedom from coercion by others, freedom to make one's own choices. But suppose all human beings were born with sufficient insight always to see that (as rationalism claims) the morally right choice is always preferable to evil. In this

case freedom would be compatible with a world devoid of moral evil, and the possibility of choosing evil would remain an abstract power that never becomes actual. The only way the concept of freedom could be shown to entail moral evil would be if the perception of the preferability of goodness, just hypothesized, were itself declared a limitation upon freedom, in that if we always saw the better course to be preferable we would not have two genuine alternatives open to us and therefore no real freedom of choice. But what sort of freedom is this? It is not a freedom from coercion since knowledge is not coercive; rather it is caprice, freedom from rationality, that would thus be held up as the good which justifies the existence of moral evil, and this would be a strange value for rationalism to cherish. Indeed, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz all regard true freedom not as freedom from rational inclination, but as freedom from ignorance and passion.

What then is the rational justification for our propensity to error and thus to moral evil, since it does not seem required by free choice alone? This has proved one of the most difficult questions for rationalism to answer. Descartes, after considering the question at length, finally resorts to an unsupported hypothesis:

nevertheless I cannot therefore deny that the universe may be somehow more perfect because some of its parts are not free from defect while others are, than it would be if all its parts were alike.⁹

Similarly, Spinoza attempts to account for human fallibility in terms of the principle that *in mundo non datur saltus*, which asserts that every degree of perfection must be instantiated, from the lowest to the highest, whence such imperfect beings as mankind are necessary (end of Appendix to *Ethics* I). But the principle that the most perfect possible world must represent every possible degree of imperfection is hardly self-evident. It derives either from a questionable application of the principle of democracy, or else from the Neoplatonic and medieval analogy of being and light: light's illumination progressively decreases as one moves farther from the source until there is absolute darkness, and thus every degree of light exists between perfect light and perfect darkness. If being may be understood on this model, every degree of reality must exist between absolute being and absolute nothingness, as a result of which all beings but one must be imperfect in varying degrees. The difficulty with this view, for rationalism, is that it is fundamentally dualistic. To be sure, nothingness is conceived as a privation of being, rather than a negation working against it, but it is nevertheless independent of being and thus indicates the existence of a second principle. We can conceive of darkness as privative of light because we conceive of empty space that can fail to be illuminated. Thus, too, we can conceive of

nothingness as privative of being only if we presuppose an abstract "void," or some "receptacle" such as matter or spacetime, which can fail to be made real. Reality, like light, can be conceived as "deprived" only if we can conceive of some recalcitrant substratum in which its power is dispersed. Alternatively, it might be argued that our imperfect nature is necessitated by the fact that God, as absolutely infinite (*Ethics* I, def. 6), must include every possible grade of being. But it is by no means clear that such a conception of infinity, as embracing every degree of imperfection, is consistent with God's being "consummately perfect" in any meaningful sense—as opposed to an arbitrary equation of perfection with infinity—as Spinoza assumes that it is in the strongest of his proofs for the existence of infinite substance (I, 11, second proof). In general, this explanation of our imperfection rests upon these proofs whose cogency is much disputed. Finally, when Spinoza takes up the problem of error part way through part 2 of the *Ethics*, his monistic rationalism seems incapable of furnishing an explanation, and his position transforms itself into a dualistic idealism (which remains in force for the duration of the *Ethics*), opposing to mind the hindrance of corporeal passion and imagination, whereas mind and corporeity were formerly held to be identical in mode and substance, differing only in aspect.¹⁰

Leibniz's attempted solution similarly seeks to trace our propensity to err to a limitation of our nature that must somehow be necessary for the greatest goodness of the whole. This necessity he attempts to derive from such principles as the identity of indiscernibles, which, he says, requires us to fall short of God's omniscience; and, again, the principle that *non datur hiatus*. We have already discussed the latter, and the former, to the extent that it differs from the latter, is equally problematic: even if we were incapable of error we would hardly be indiscernible from God.

As for natural evil, it is taken by rationalism to be something necessary for the greatest perfection of the whole, but when specific proofs for this are demanded they always involve assumptions and hypotheses which either appeal to religious faith or are unsupported and as easily rejected as accepted.

This discussion of rationalism is by no means intended as a refutation, for though its assumptions are not self-evidently true, neither are they self-evidently false. What I wish to show is rather that the admirable simplicity and economy of the rationalist view of the world breaks down in the process of its specification, requiring a complexity of *a priori* assumption which the dialectical rationalist and empiricist views need not contend with. The reason for this is that rationalism is least able to save the phenomena, which often appear contingent and irrational, and thus the reality of rationalism

seems irreconcilably alien to the world of our experience which it is meant to describe.

Rationalism may, however, attempt a more radical solution to the problem of evil by stating, for example, that all evil is a species of contingency, that contingency is a necessary condition of the existence of individuals, and that the existence of individuals is rationally necessary. In this case the existence of contingency is no longer denied, and the common ground between rationalism and dialectical rationalism is reached.

Dialectical rationalism, averring the existence both of contingency and rationality in the world, is under no prior commitment to show everything to be rational, and thus has no need of the elaborate assumptions of rationalism. On the other hand it lacks the formal certitude of rationalism and empiricism, both of which seek to understand the world in terms of a single, previously conceived principle, whether reason or experience. The task of dialectical rationalism is to tear the rational reality of the world away from its immersion in the contingent. But, as the above analysis showed, contingency is inseparable in experience from necessity: each component of a contingent event is necessary in itself though their confluence is unaccountable, and every necessary event arises out of a background involving contingent antecedents. Contingency runs through necessity as currents run through a river. They can be distinguished only in thought and only with difficulty and limited certainty. Hegel has been accused of dogmatism, for example, in his "deduction" of the necessity of precisely the seven planets that were known in his day, but such an accusation shows a misunderstanding of what he was doing. He was perfectly aware that some facts are contingent and inexplicable, and says so repeatedly in the *Philosophy of Nature*. But he also believed that nature exhibits the presence of rationality as well. The task of his philosophy, as it applied to nature, was to distinguish the real from the contingent by determining, on the basis of all available empirical evidence, whether or not a given phenomenon can be shown to be rationally justified. In the case of the planets, he thought he had detected such a justification, which shows, at most, not that Hegel was dogmatic but only that he was capable of error. His philosophical position is discredited by it no more than empirical science is discredited by the fact that its theories are repeatedly falsified by subsequent empirical discoveries, or by the occasional mistaking of coincidence for causality (which is also, in a different way, the mistaking of a contingency for reason).

Given the limited certainty of dialectical rationalism and the unprovable assumptions of rationalism, it would seem that Kant was right, even apart from his transcendental epistemology: reality can never be precisely

deduced from appearance, noumena can never be deduced from phenomena, metaphysics can never become an exact science. But this should not be taken to mean, as Kant himself showed in the second and third critiques, that one must despair of any attempt to apprehend reality. Nor need it even mean, as Kant thought it did, that such an attempt must dispense with the service of theoretical and speculative reason. It means rather that ontology will continue to be faced with the irreconcilable fundamental differences that have always attended it. While this is perhaps regrettable, in precisely the way contingency might be called regrettable, it does not render ontology impossible, only imperfectible.

I suggested earlier that empiricism differs from dialectical rationalism by taking the presence of irrationality in the world as an indication that the demands of reason are simply not applicable to experience, rather than distinguishing a rational component from the contingent factor as dialectical rationalism does. But insofar as empiricists believe in anything like a Judeo-Christian God they must recognize the operation of a rational principle in the world, and are thus far akin to the dialectical rationalists. The difference seems to be that empiricism regards as both desirable and possible the attempt to understand our experience of the world without trying to understand the ultimate foundation of that world. It thus attempts to render unto philosophy what is Caesar's and unto religion what is God's. In so doing it departs from the traditional view that religion and philosophy are two ways of coming to terms with the same reality, and sees them, as Kant did, as coming to terms with different orders of reality. It regards this as the more desirable course because it has traditionally taken empirical science for its model, and has thus held that any sort of speculation that cannot be tested empirically, on analogy with scientific experimentation, is groundless and philosophically irresponsible. Although this drastically limits its range, the sacrifice of synopsis to certitude is deemed worthwhile. As Hume demonstrated, however, even empirical investigations produce no certitude, and if certitude is demanded the result is skepticism. The kinds of explanations afforded by empirical science have themselves turned out to be hypotheses of varying probability rather than the certain truths they once were thought to be; although their theories, unlike those of speculative ontology, can be subjected to controlled experiment, those that survive such a test are not thereby shown to be true, only sustained for the time being. Moreover, although ontological theories are not generally subject to controlled experimentation they are testable in much the same way as any other theory: they must show themselves to be in accordance with the demands of reason and profitably to illuminate our experience and comprehension of

the world. And while they do not, to be sure, expose themselves to the possibility of refutation in the way scientific theories do, the latter, when thus refuted, are not generally abandoned but only slightly modified, much as philosophical theories are modified to meet an objection of reason or fact. The difference, indeed, is more one of degree than of kind, which may be seen also from the fact that as scientific explanations become more and more general, they more closely resemble those of ontology, as is especially evident in theoretical physics. The reason is that ultimately our experience of the world and our understanding of the ground of the world, which empiricism seeks to isolate from each other, are inseparable. Although certitude may diminish as speculation increases, philosophy, as the attempt to understand the world by questioning it, ought to be willing to take that risk for the sake of its own enterprise; from the standpoint of philosophy, understanding, even if attended by uncertainty, must always be preferable to dogmatic faith or the abstention of thought.

From the foregoing it should be clear that I do not regard any of the general philosophical positions discussed here as either demonstrable or refutable, but rather as representative of differing ways in which we may be willing to leave certain problems unexplained for the sake of explaining others. Accordingly, although there is no universally satisfactory answer to the question of why being becomes appearance, yet since philosophy presupposes our acceptance of some distinction between them, it is essential that we see what is at stake among these various positions so that we can come to terms with the nature of our own commitment. There is no question but that the world becomes a different world *for us* depending on the nature of this commitment.

University of Guelph

Notes

¹I have compared these at length in "First Philosophy: Metaphysics or Epistemology?", *Dialogue* XI (1972) pp. 1-22.

²A problem arises from the fact that at *Metaphysics* 8 (1074a35) Aristotle uses the term τὸ τὶ ἦν εἶναι to refer to the essence of the god, a being without potentiality. This problem, however, arises not from the present interpretation, but from the fact—unaccountable, I should think, on any interpretation—that Aristotle refers to the essence of a timeless being in the past tense at all. A possible explanation is that τὸ τὶ ἦν εἶναι had become a technical term to refer to

essences of individual substances generally, as opposed to universal attributes, and was here used in that capacity even though in other respects it was not quite appropriate.

³Cf. his letter to Coste, 1707; translated in Leibniz, *Selections*, edited by Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribners, 1951), pp. 480-85.

⁴This cumbersome phrase is meant to suggest the position of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel, who, while believing that the world is essentially rational, also believed that there was an antithetical factor of irrationality or contingency by which rationality is limited.

⁵Hume goes so far as to claim that the logical and mathematical truths of reason are simply inapplicable to the world: "relations of ideas" are entirely distinct from "matters of fact"—thus entirely ignoring the success of mathematical science (*An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, p. 40, in the Bobbs-Merrill edition: New York, 1955).

⁶*Inquiry* I, p. 17.

⁷*Introduction to Metaphysics* (translated by Ralph Manheim, Garden City: Anchor, 1961), p. 86. All subsequent references to Heidegger, unless otherwise noted, are to this work. As he here develops his position by means of an interpretation of presocratic writers, most of the quotations directly refer to their thought, not his, but they are meant to express his own position as well.

⁸This aspect of medieval theology arose in turn out of Neoplatonism (e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* III 2), which may itself have arisen independently of any religious influence, unless it was influenced by the monistic creation theories of Brahmanism and Buddhism as many passages seem to suggest. There had been an exchange of ideas between India and Greece at least since Alexander's Indian expedition.

⁹*Meditations*, IV, p. 63 (Adam and Tannery's Latin text), translated by Lawrence J. Lafleur (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951).

¹⁰For passages in which this shift may be seen to occur, see especially part II, props. 40-49. It becomes most clearly evident in the argument for immortality (e.g., V 23).